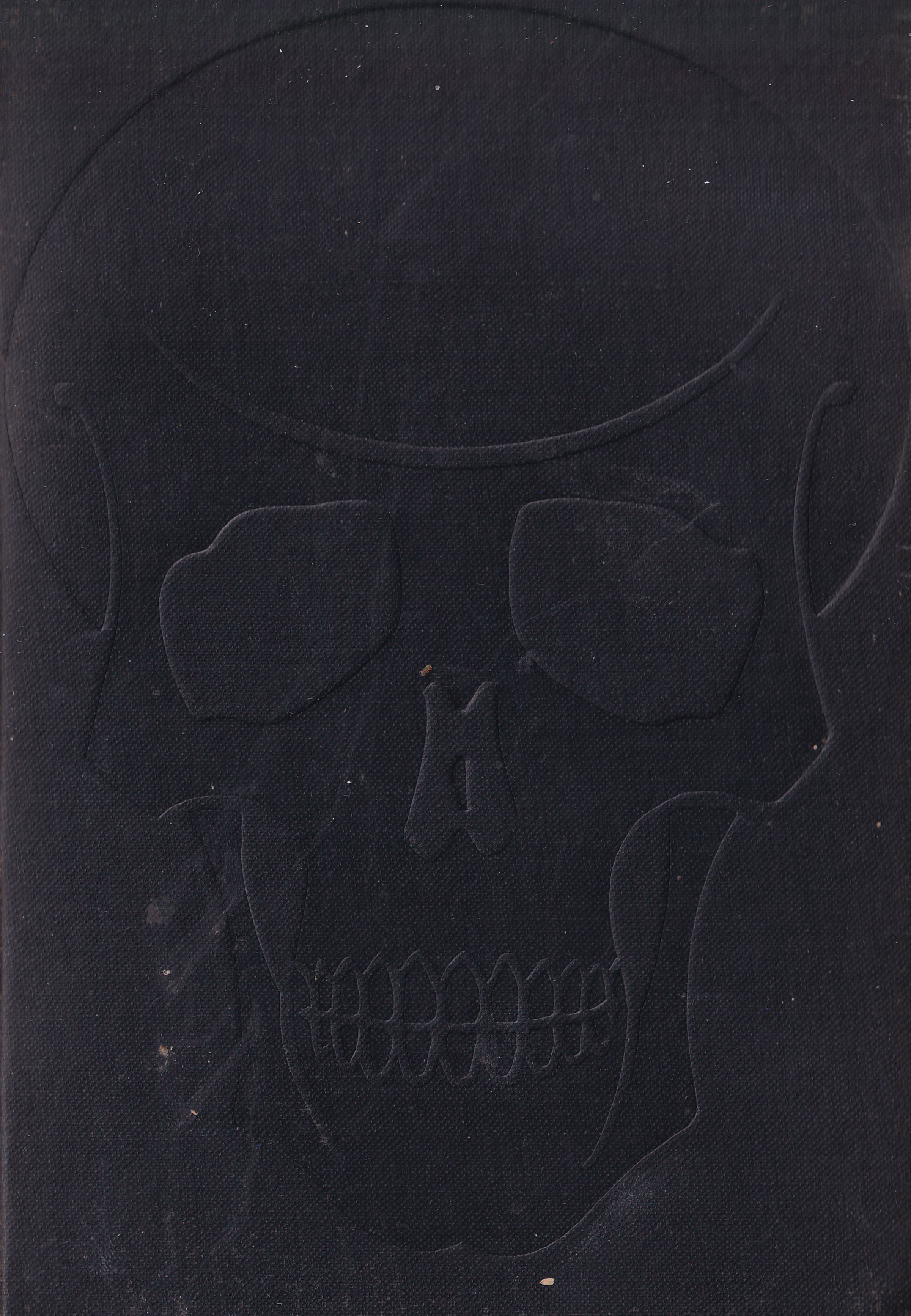
LONDON CALLING

GIELGUD
MARVELL

THE CRIME
CLUB INC.



English films and mystery plays have made the magic phrase "London calling—" a symbol of sinister deeds and threatening danger. But no hint of disorder has ever penetrated the sacred precincts of the B. B. C.* itself, whence that call originates—until an obscure actor was murdered one night before an open microphone. The Yard, used to murders concealed with the greatest cunning, was baffled by the very openness of the crime, by the murderer who could strike as a million people listened in. Inspector Spears, Scotland Yard's ace of the central London district, thought that guttered candles might be a clue, that a watch's loud ticking in a silent mike might clinch a suspect's guilt. But he was treading strange and unfamiliar ground, the vast mysterious world ruled over by men at cluttered control boards, bending over flashing tubes, sending incomprehensible orders over a baffling maze of wires. He was dealing with a criminal with science at his—or her—fingertips, with resources no killer had ever used before. But Scotland Yard never calls quits *—and Inspector Spears found the scrapbook at last.* For that, and many other thrilling moments, this mystery will be read with an eagerness to turn quickly to the solution which we hope, for your own pleasure, you will curb.

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* The British Broadcasting Company

LONDON CALLING

LONDON CALLING

Val Gielgud and Holt Marvell

To Inspector Spears was assigned Scotland Yard's weirdest case—the man who was murdered while millions listened in.

GARDEN CITY, N. Y. 1934 PUBLISHED FOR
THE CRIME CLUB, INC.
BY DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC.

PRINTED AT THE *Country Life Press*, GARDEN CITY, N. Y., U. S. A.

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FIRST EDITION

FOREWORD

THE PUBLISHERS wish to emphasize on behalf of the authors that although for the sake of verisimilitude the description of some of the technical and architectural features of Broadcasting House happen to be accurate, this does not mean that there is portrayal in the characterization of those members of the staff of the B.B.C. with whom the story is concerned. Both the events and the characters are entirely products of imagination, although use has been made of designations officially applied to certain members of the B.B.C. staff.

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THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE STORY

General Sir Herbert Farquharson	*Controller*
Julian Caird	*Dramatic Director*
Stewart Evans	*Programme Research*
Desmond Hancock	*Balance & Control*
Ian Macdonald	*Studio Manager*
Guy Bannister	*Sound Effects Section*
Joseph Higgins	*Studio Attendant*

of the B.B.C.

George Fleming		
Rodney Fleming,	*his brother*	*Author of "The Scarlet Highwayman."*
Leopold Dryden Isabel	*His wife, formerly Isabel Palmer*	*Members of the Cast of "The Scarlet Highwayman."*
Sidney Parsons		
Miss Topsy Levine		
Miss Patricia Marsden		
Detective Inspector Simon Spears		*Of Scotland Yard*

and

Various Members of the Staff at Broadcasting House, of the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, and of the British Public.

LONDON CALLING

CHAPTER I

IN PORTLAND PLACE

BROADCASTING HOUSE has been called a good many names and described as a good many things. Names and descriptions have varied from the complimentary to the scurrilous, and almost from the sublime to the ridiculous. The building has been compared with a ship, with a fortress, with a towering cliff. It has been called "majestic"; "a worthy edifice, well-fitted to house the marvels it contains"; "a damned-awful erection" (by various architects who would have liked to have had hands in the building of it); "Sing-Sing" (by certain frivolous members of the B.B.C. staff, who had visited Berlin and heard this term applied to the new building of the Deutsches Rundfunk in the Masurenallee); "One of the seven new wonders of the world" (by a patriotic daily newspaper). Broadcasting House, in short, has been extravagantly lauded and ludicrously damned. But one thing about it remains: if you walk northwards from Oxford Circus for more than fifty yards, you cannot miss it. The Round Church ceases to be the dominant architectural figure of the landscape. You stop. Your eyes travel slowly upwards from the bronze entrance doors; pause for a moment questioningly at Prospero and Ariel; continue by way of the flower-bordered balcony of the director-general's room, past one row of windows after another, to the trellised metal towers upon the roof, and the flagstaff with the corporation's flag fluttering against the sky. You think: Announcers . . . news bulletins . . . dance-band music . . . the Prime Minister speaking from the Guildhall . . . the Derby . . . Wimbledon . . . Gillie Potter . . . Christopher Stone . . . Walford Davies . . . Mabel Constanduros . . . symphony concerts . . . talks . . . plays . . . microphones . . . Machinery . . . actors . . . engineers . . . "It's the hell of a big place, anyway," you murmur to your companion, with a certain lack of conviction.

And then you remember that you're rather late for lunch, and you move on in a hurry. Perhaps it reminds you to tell your wife that night that you've forgotten to renew your receiving license, and that she'd better do something about it. . . .

It was almost midsummer. Seven o'clock in the evening had just chimed from the Round Church. Behind it, giving to the imaginative something of the impression of a stranded leviathan, Broadcasting House lay quietly in the doldrums of the early evening—between the haste and scurry of the day and the controlled fury of the night. With the end of the rush hour the flooding confusion of traffic was on the ebb. The great width of Portland Place shone golden in the mellow sunset of a fine London summer day. Drivers of ranked taxis sprawled, indolent and happy, over their wheels. A party of Americans, new-landed from the *Berengaria,* declaimed nasally above piled cabin trunks on the pavement outside the Langham Hotel. Sparrows twittered. Cats slept, minding their own business, and setting a good example to all that passed them by and compared them unfavourably with dogs. Outside the Queen's Hall a small queue of enthusiasts was forming for the night's concert of Modern French Music. . . .

Past that queue, and slightly enlivened by a single half-pint of bitter beer, walked a young man. He wore a stiff shirt, a dinner jacket, and no hat. He carried his head poked slightly forward from the shoulders; and his eyes, behind rimless pince-nez, had a peering expression. Two other young men, wearied perhaps with conversing vigorously on the subject of "Les Six," turned sideways in the queue and watched him as he skirted the Round Church, crossed the road beyond, and vanished at last into Broadcasting House.

"He's an announcer," said one of them and sniffed disparagingly. "Why they put 'em into evening dress . . . ! Snobbish nonsense! That whole place wants a damn' good shake-up!"

"My dear Claude, don't be stupid. You can't shake up a set of robots. There's not a drop of good red blood about the whole place. Robots engaged in the retailing of tripe! That's broadcasting."

"Perhaps as it stands, yes, my good Philip. But think what chaps with brains and a policy could do with the thing! Why, in Russia . . ." After which the conversation took a strictly Marxian turn, and became, frankly, pretty tedious.

The two young men in question were typical of an odd and growing class. They called themselves Communists; which meant that they saved themselves a certain amount of trouble by shaving only every other day, by never cleaning their teeth, and by adopting a general self-conscious shabbiness expressed in dusty black hats and faded red ties. They patronized the proletariat and bored their acquaintances with the oft-repeated and detailed description of that fortnight's specially conducted tour of Russia during which, knowing nothing of the language, they had seen with their own eyes the triumph of Leninism and apparently experienced the painful process of a second birth. For this, nothing so *bourgeoise* as a mother had been necessary. In their eyes Broadcasting, under the Corporation's Control, had joined the twin pillars of Capitalism and the Church as a prop of Tyranny.

"By the way," said Claude, suddenly, "you know Julian Gaird, don't you? Talking of broadcasting made me think of him."

"Slightly," said Philip languidly. "Romantic sort of ass, isn't he? Why?"

"Oh, he suggested that we might listen to one of those fantastic plays he puts over the air tonight, instead of coming here. Apparently Rodney Fleming's written it."

"Not very thrilling. Of course Fleming's an interesting chap. I think he'll take Noel's place when he dries up or gets knighted."

"I liked his first play," admitted Claude. "But I'll bet he's a flash in the pan. What's he doing, messing about with broadcasting? Especially a play all about highwaymen and Bow Street runners. Sounds too frightful to me."

"Well," pronounced Philip with finality, "I wouldn't listen to the damned play if you paid me! I hate period stuff—it's so bogus. I don't know why they try to broadcast plays, anyway. I bet no one really listens to 'em. And if they do . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I certainly can't imagine anyone bothering to remember a thing about a broadcast play once it's over," said Claude. "Fleming's wasted his time writing it, in my opinion. After tonight no one'll think twice about it again."

But he was wrong. And there were occasions during the following week or so when Claude and Philip regretted extremely that they had not taken Julian Caird's hint and listened to the first transmission on the regional wavelength of *The Scarlet Highwayman,* a play specially written for broadcasting by Rodney Fleming, and produced by Julian Caird.

At the reception desk in the right-hand corner of the hall of Broadcasting House, the uniformed commissionaires on night duty had replaced the daytime receptionists and were checking over the items and studio accommodation of the night's programmes.

"Rather a heavy evening, eh?" A tall, white-haired man with an eyeglass and a clipped military speech had crossed to the desk. "I've been kept late, so I'll take the opportunity to see the variety while I'm about it. In BA, I suppose?"

"Yessir, BA, national—9:20 to 10:20."

"Thank you. In the most unlikely case of anyone wanting me, I'll be there—in the gallery."

"Very good, sir."

"What's this play on the other side?"

The commissionaire bent over his papers.

"Regional—9:20 to 10:15, sir. Called *The Scarlet Highwayman,* by a Mr. Fleming."

"Yes, yes, of course. Mr. Caird's in charge?"

"Yes, sir," and the commissionaire grinned. "And using more studios than ever, sir. The whole bl—the whole lot of the sixth and seventh floors."

"I see. Mr. Caird in yet?"

"Not yet, sir. Mr. Evans is in—in his office, sir."

"Mr. Evans? Oh, yes, programme research. Quite so."

And General Sir Herbert Farquharson nodded briskly and walked away.

As he walked he smiled faintly.

"I don't know how you stick it there," a friend of his had said to him that day in his club. "Why, the place must run itself practically by this time. Just routine. For a fellow like yourself, who lived for tiger-shooting and polo, it must be dull as ditchwater! Does nothing exciting ever happen?"

"Seldom—except when distinguished talkers mislay their scripts," he had replied. "No, on the whole we steer clear of melodrama." . . .

"And a good job, too," he now added mentally, as he crossed the big hall.

CHAPTER II

BROADCAST OF PLAY

At precisely twenty minutes past ten on the same evening, the red light—indicating a transmission in progress—on the wall of the dramatic control panel room on the eighth floor at Broadcasting House went out. The three men sitting in front of the dramatic control panel—that curious contraption with its double row of volume-control knobs and its single row of light-cue switches—gave simultaneous sighs of relief.

"Exactly on the minute," said Hancock, the balance-and-control engineer, rubbing his hands together and flexing his fingers.

For an hour and five minutes he had sat at the panel, mixing the output of the various studios in the transmission of the radio play, *The Scarlet Highwayman,* and for an hour and five minutes his fingers had played with these knobs and switches much after the fashion of an organist at an organ.

On his right, Julian Caird, B.B.C. dramatic director, and producer of this particular play, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and stood up.

"Thank you, Desmond," he said. "You did very well. My God, what an evening! At one stage I thought we should never get through. This play's taught me a thing or two, at any rate. Just one infernal crisis after another. I must just go down and say a word to the cast, and pull Rodney Fleming out of the 6A listening room, and then what do you say to a drink, Desmond?"

"Nothing more you want, Mr. Caird?" asked the third man, the engineer on duty.

"No, thanks," said Caird. "Except that I wish to God your people would make sure that those return lights from the studios don't fail."

He jerked his thumb towards the indicator on the wall.

"I nearly broke my neck dashing down to 6A on that infernal corkscrew staircase between the sixth and seventh floors, and for all I know Hancock may have messed up the whole bloody play during those minutes I was away." And he grinned at Hancock, whom he knew to be absolutely reliable.

"As a matter of fact, Julian," said Hancock, "that scene went considerably better than it ever did at rehearsal. Parsons really got it this time. He 'died' like a good 'un. He really did what you told him. I think you can be pretty pleased with yourself, even if you have got an extra grey hair or two as a result of the evening."

"I'm sorry you were upset, Mr. Caird," said the engineer. "But everything was tested as usual."

"Yes," said Caird. "I know it was the conductor's fault this time. But it was a damned nuisance just the same!" And he and Hancock went out of the room.

As they strolled down the staircase and through the swing doors on the seventh floor which led into the inner tower of the building, in which all the studios were grouped, Hancock took Caird's arm.

"You know, Julian, I think you want a holiday," he said. "I've never seen you get so worked up. You've been on the jump all the evening."

Caird stopped and for a moment leaned his back against the wall in the narrow passage. Even the carefully subdued modern lighting did not conceal the shadows under his eyes and the hard lines of jaw and cheekbones under the tightly drawn skin. As he took out a match to light a cigarette, his hands were shaking.

"Oh, I'm all right," he said abruptly. "It's only this infernal play. I can't remember a worse ten days in all the four years I've been here. First of all the trouble about the Drydens, with Rodney Fleming at me all the time to throw 'em out, and Leopold doing his 'star' stuff. Then that row with Evans, who won't remember that he's here to do what I tell him and not to push his oar into what doesn't concern him. And then the play itself. How many have we done together, Desmond—about fifty? We've never had a tougher job. Every studio on the sixth and seventh floors and 8A into the bargain. I wish Fleming had never written the damn' thing, or that I'd ever accepted it."

The balance-and-control man smiled and took Caird's arm again.

"I bet you'll find it's been a cracking success. Come on, let's butter up the cast and tell them all how good they were. Where did you say Fleming was?"

"In the 6A listening room."

"What the deuce is he doing there?"

"Well, I didn't want him in the D.C. room," said

Caird. "Actors are a curse, but authors are intolerable. Besides, he wanted to be able to *see* some of it going on, and as most of the big scenes were in 6A, he could watch through the glass panel. And he was expecting a telephone call, so I arranged with control room to put it through to the telephone in the listening room, where he couldn't disturb anyone else. I wonder if Dryden's all right?"

"Dryden?" asked Hancock. "Why?"

"Oh, of course," said Caird, "I didn't tell you. You remember when I thought that the return lights had failed and bolted down to warn Ian Macdonald in the studio?"

"Yes."

"If you remember, it was just before the big ballroom scene in 6A. Just as I got to the top of the spiral staircase on my way back, almost exactly where we are now, I ran into Leo Dryden. Of course, he ought to have been down in 6A getting ready for his next scene. Instead, he was coming towards me in the direction of the lifts."

"What the devil was he doing there?"

"Exactly what I asked him. He was looking frightful—white as a sheet about the gills. He muttered something about our rotten synthetic air in the studios and going outside the tower for some fresh. I hadn't time to do more than swear at him and rush back up here. But I noticed he was looking seedy when he came this evening."

"Well, he finished his part all right, anyhow," said Hancock. "You go first."

CHAPTER III

UNDER THE MICROPHONE

JULIAN CAIRD started down the corkscrew staircase, then turned suddenly.

"Oh, Desmond," he said, "just have a look in 7B and 7C in case there's anyone still there. A good many of this cast have never broadcast before, you know. They may have stayed where they were to the end."

Hancock nodded and moved back along the passage. As he did so, the door on his right at the head of the stairs opened, and a dark young man in a double-breasted dinner jacket, with very smooth black hair brushed straight back, came out of the 6A listening room.

"Hello, Julian," he said. "Had you forgotten all about me? I thought it went terribly well. I couldn't have asked for it to be better done."

"I couldn't have done it if you hadn't written it, Rodney," said Caird. "Coming down? I want to see the Drydens. Leo was looking awfully seedy, but I thought perhaps we could get him and Isabel to come out to supper. I'm just waiting for Hancock. You might congratulate him—he did marvels on the panel."

"Of course," said Fleming. "By the way, thanks awfully for fixing that telephone call for me."

"It was strictly against all regulations and instructions," said Caird. "But I'm glad——"

He was interrupted by the shouting of his own name which came, rather muffled, from a studio farther along the passage.

"That's Hancock," said Caird. "What on earth——"

The door into 7C was flung open, and Hancock burst into the passage.

"Come here, Julian, for God's sake!" he said. "Quickly. There's been an accident!"

Fleming and Caird stared at each other for a moment, then joined Hancock in the studio doorway.

In the far corner, almost under the microphone standard, lay a man's figure unnaturally crumpled.

Caird started forward.

"I suppose he's fainted," he said. "Give me the water jug, Desmond."

Behind the three of them the door shut automatically.

Studio 7C was one with special acoustic treatment removing all natural echo, and at that moment Rodney Fleming felt acutely the oppressive, almost sinister atmosphere of this room with its single shaded light, its thick carpet and queerly padded walls. The ventilation was perfect, but he felt he wanted to draw unusually deep breaths.

"It's no use, Julian," said Hancock. "And you'd better not touch him, or anything else."

"What do you mean?" said Caird.

"That is Sidney Parsons," said Hancock. "And he's dead. Strangled. No wonder that scene was so well played."

CHAPTER IV

THE GENERAL TAKES CHARGE

EIGHT floors below, in the special vaudeville studio at Broadcasting House, professionally known as BA, the evening's hour of variety was going unusually well. No "act" had rung up from one of the halls to say that they were very sorry but they would be bound to be two or three minutes late; no comedian had wandered from his carefully censored script to insert a doubtful joke and scarify thousands of suburban listeners. The new director of variety, always an enthusiast for experiments, had introduced a small chorus who sang and kicked with gratifying vivacity, and more than one listener remarked that the studio audience sounded less mechanical than usual that evening. . . .

Prominent amongst the audience, in the centre of the gallery, sat General Sir Herbert Farquharson, the corporation's administrative controller. Tall, distinguished-looking, and white-haired, with a cropped moustache, and an eyeglass immovably fixed in his left eye, he viewed the proceedings with that slightly aloof geniality which was characteristic of him. The hands of the big black-and-green clock facing him on the wall at the back of the tiny stage pointed to twenty-eight minutes past ten. The last turn, a famous cockney cross-talk pair, delivered their final witticism into the grey torpedo-shaped microphone suspended between them and the band conductor, smiled and bowed at the audience, and walked off the stage. The limes at each corner of the gallery went out; the studio lights went up; and the band crashed into its final number. At that moment the General felt a hand on his shoulder. It was fortunate that the number in question was American and "hot," for no one had tapped General Farquharson on the shoulder for about twenty-five years, and though genial, he was a disciplinarian and choleric.

"What the devil——" he said, turning sharply in his seat. "What is it, Caird?" Then he remembered that the red transmission lights were still on and noticed the astonished glances of the occupants of the adjoining seats. But before he could lower his voice to repeat his question, Caird had whispered urgently:

"Might I speak to you alone, sir, outside? It's rather—important," and led the way towards the door of the gallery.

General Farquharson frowned, stumbled over the quite exceptionally large feet of the lady in the seat next to him—who happened to be the mother of one of the chorus girls—apologized handsomely, and followed Caird out into the passage.

"Well, Caird, what is it? Are you ill? You're as white as a sheet."

Julian Caird seemed to have some difficulty in replying. He stood against the wall, his throat moving convulsively and his hands locked together.

"I'm sorry, sir," he stammered at last, "but I thought you should know at once. There's been an—an accident up in 7C!"

"An accident?"

"One of my actors," Caird went on, and found his voice again. "We've just finished a play on the other wavelength, sir—*The Scarlet Highwayman.* One of the fellows in the cast was a man called Sidney Parsons. Hancock found him in 7C at the end of the show. He was dead."

"Dead?" said the General. "My dear Caird, don't talk nonsense!"

Through the heavy rubber-sheathed door behind them came the final chord from the band and the sound of the audience applauding.

"They'll be out of BA in a minute, sir, now. Would you mind coming upstairs with me? I know it sounds absurd, but there's every reason to suppose that he's not only dead, but murdered."

"Murdered? This is fantastic, Caird! What have you done?"

"I put a studio attendant on the door of 7C, sir; and warned my studio manager Macdonald, and Bannister."

"Bannister, your effects man?"

"Yes, sir. Guy Bannister. I warned them to keep the sixth and seventh floors clear, and told the house superintendent to telephone to the police. It was only then that I heard you were in the vaudeville studio, sir. I came straight to you as soon as I knew."

"You seem to have been pretty sensible, Caird. We'll go up."

"Thank you, sir."

The General leading, they went up into the main entrance hall, where they met the house superintendent emerging from his office.

"I'm glad you're here, sir," said the latter. "This is a terrible business. Scotland Yard are sending a detective and a police surgeon at once."

The General glared through his glass.

"Are you quite sure all this is necessary?" he said sharply. "It means the most distressing kind of publicity."

"I don't see what else we can do, sir," said the house superintendent defensively. "I've seen the body. It's a clear case of a killing, sir. I didn't touch anything."

"A killing! In Broadcasting House, of all places! Good God!" said General Farquharson. "How was it the thing wasn't discovered until the end of the play?"

"Parsons was murdered in character in the course of the play. He was alone in 7C," said Caird. "My God, sir, do you realize that everyone who heard that play must have heard him die? That makes it pretty unique in the annals of crime."

"We don't know yet that it is a crime," snapped the General. "Don't jump to conclusions!" He turned to the house superintendent. "Have this detective fellow sent straight up to the studio as soon as he comes. Don't let the news spread. Above everything, don't talk to reporters if they get wind of it. Caird, you come with me. I'm going up there now. No, damn it all, we won't wait for the lift. If I can walk up seven flights of stairs, so can you. You're thirty years younger than I am."

The audience from BA was surging into the hall, some of them laughing and chattering, most of them staring about with unabashed curiosity at the Eric Gill statue of the Sower, flanked by the mahogany reception desk on the one side, and the bookstall for the corporation publications on the other. And as Julian Caird followed the General's long legs up the stairs, it seemed to him incredible that that audience should be wandering out to the normal trains and buses which would bear them to their normal homes; that they should be so completely unconscious that the sudden death, from which they prayed so regularly to be delivered, had struck within the walls of the same building in which they had watched a variety programme on the national wavelength. . . .

CHAPTER V

PECULIAR CONDUCT OF HIGGINS

TO JULIAN CAIRD'S relief, not even the General's abounding energy could withstand the effort of taking seven flights of stone stairs two at a time. On the fifth floor he was merely walking quickly, and on the sixth-floor landing he even paused for a breather. It was during that momentary check that there was a surprising interruption. Heavy boots clattered down the stairs from the seventh floor, and an elderly man in a brown overall, with his head ducked forward so that he could hardly see where he was going, bumped into the controller and almost flattened him against the wall. Between shock and indignation, the General was momentarily speechless. But Caird recognized the man for the studio attendant whom he had set on guard outside the door of 7C after the discovery of the tragedy.

"What the blazes are you doing here, Higgins?" he said. "Didn't I tell you to stay by that studio door?"

The man mumbled something apologetically and stood shifting his feet. He was tall and weedy, with an untidy fair moustache and an unhealthily white face deeply lined. His pale eyes slid from side to side in their sockets like a cornered cat's.

"What's the meaning of this, Higgins?" rasped the General, recovering his breath. "Why have you disobeyed orders?"

The man did not answer, and the General added sharply: "Did you go into the studio?"

"No, sir, of course not," stammered Higgins, and for the first time looked his questioners in the face. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know it was important. I misunderstood you, Mr. Caird. I was off duty at the end of the play, and I've an important engagement. That's how it was."

"You must have understood," said Caird. "I was perfectly definite. You weren't to leave till I came back."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry."

"Well, it can't be helped," said the General testily. "Let's get on."

But Caird had remembered something.

"Just a minute, sir. There's something else. Look here, Higgins, you were on duty during the play, weren't you?"

The studio attendant nodded.

"Just exactly where?"

Higgins moistened his lips furtively with his tongue.

"I was at the north end of the studio corridor on the seventh floor, sir. On the door leading into the passage that takes you out of the tower."

"Why was that?" asked the General.

"I remember I asked Macdonald to put someone there," said Caird. "If that door's not watched, you get people going through the tower corridor, using it as a short cut, during the transmission. We've often had trouble that way. It's essential in a complicated play like tonight's to keep the corridors clear. That's just what I was getting at. I had to go down to 6A from the panel room during the transmission, because one of the return lights failed. I went along the seventh-floor studio corridor. Higgins wasn't on that door when I went through it. . . . Where were you, Higgins?"

"I was on the door all through the transmission," said the studio attendant sullenly.

"Damn it, Higgins, I've got eyes in my head!" began Caird angrily, but the General interrupted him.

"Now, Higgins," he said quietly, "don't make bad worse by lying. You've obviously been neglecting your duties this evening. This is a serious matter, and you may find yourself in a very awkward position if you aren't completely frank with us. Where were you when you should have been on that door?"

The studio attendant fidgeted miserably, and suddenly Caird was struck with an overwhelming feeling of pity for him. He looked so ill and thin and miserable, facing the magnificently authoritative figure of the General. And he could have sworn there were tears in those shifty eyes. . . .

For about thirty seconds longer, Higgins faced it out. Then his nerve failed him.

"I'll tell you, sir," he said. "I suppose you'll give me the sack, but I'd have got that anyhow, after tonight. It's a girl, sir. One of those girls who work in the canteen in the basement. We've been sweet on each other for some time, but it was coming to no good, what with me being married and everything. And yesterday she wrote me a letter and gave me the chuck.

Well, it isn't easy for me to go down there, sir, as you know. I've no business in the basement, and the house superintendent had spoken to me about it, anyway. So I wrote her a note and asked her to come up and meet me in one of the offices on the seventh floor during the transmission tonight while I was on duty. I gave her ten o'clock as the time in my note, and that was when I went to the office."

The General snorted, outraged at such misuse of his beloved official accommodation. But Higgins went on hurriedly:

"But she didn't come, sir. It's nothing to do with her. I swear she didn't come."

"Very proper of her," said the General. "Well?"

"I waited as long as I dared, sir, till a minute before I knew the play ended, at twenty minutes past ten, and then I went back to the door. So I was there when Mr. Caird and Mr. Hancock came down from the panel room."

"That's true," said Caird. "He was clearing up oddments in the corridor, emptying ashtrays and so forth. That's why I told him to wait outside 7C till I got back."

"Did he know anything about the——" said the General, and stopped.

"Not unless he went into the studio, sir."

The General gnawed his moustache.

"We'll discuss your outrageous conduct later, Higgins," he said at last. "Caird, take him down to the house superintendent's office. See that he waits there and that there's somebody with him until we want him again. I expect the police will wish to have a word with him."

Higgins's jaw dropped.

"Did you say the—police, sir? I've not done nothing."

"I'm not saying you have," said the General. "I've no time to discuss it now. Take him down, Caird. I'm going up to 7C and will wait there."

"Very well, sir," said Caird. "If you don't mind, I'll come up by way of the sixth-floor artists' waiting room. The Drydens, Rodney Fleming, Macdonald, and Bannister are still waiting there."

"All right. Keep 'em there!" And the General bounded up the final flight of stairs, once more taking them two at a time.

CHAPTER VI

TYPICAL CONDUCT OF DRYDEN

IT WAS a sufficiently curious group that Caird found on his return in the waiting room on the sixth floor. On the extreme end of the long, fawn-coloured couch sat Rodney Fleming, his expression a mixture of boredom and exasperation. He was smoking a cigarette and watching Leopold and Isabel Dryden under slightly lowered lids. Leopold Dryden was fretting up and down the narrow space between the couch and the wall. With his rather long fair hair in disorder and his magnificent physique, his undoubted good looks seemed too theatrical to be quite genuine. He was playing a congenial part with his usual brilliance—the part of the baffled temperamental artist. Isabel, his wife, sat next to Fleming, watching him closely. She was a very pretty girl, not more than twenty-six, with that unusually attractive combination of fair hair and dark brown eyes.

"I wish they'd let Leo go," she whispered anxiously to Fleming. "He's been so seedy all the evening, and he wasn't a bit himself even at dinner."

Meanwhile Dryden was delivering a speech *con brio* at the unresponsive head of Ian Macdonald, the studio manager. That impassive Scot, with a head that looked as if it had been carved out of a baulk of teak, who had never been known to be disturbed by any crisis in the history of broadcast drama, gave the impression of listening with the greatest interest and sympathy.

"But I tell you it's an outrage," Dryden was declaiming as Caird came along the passage. "I insist upon some sort of explanation, at any rate. Are my wife and I to be kept here all night as if we were a couple of disreputable chorus girls, without so much as a by-your-leave? I appreciate your position, Mr. Macdonald. You have to do as you're told. But I have myself to think of—my standing and my reputation. Suppose this got about as a story! It might do me infinite harm. Perhaps now you'll be good enough to——"

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Julian," said Isabel, jumping up. "You mustn't mind Leo. But do let him go now, even if you want to keep me. I'm so afraid he's going to be ill."

"Nonsense!" said Dryden violently. But his face twitched suddenly as if with a spasm of pain, and he sat down on the sofa.

"Can I tell them yet, Julian?" asked Rodney Fleming quietly from his corner.

"Tell us what?" said Isabel.

"Not just for a minute, please," said Caird. "We won't be long now."

Dryden got up again and strode towards Caird, looking more leonine than ever.

"I won't stand for it," he almost shouted. "All this mystery-making and humbug! I only did your infernal broadcast to oblige Isabel. She made such a point of it. And you, too, Fleming, of course, as you were good enough to say you'd written the play for me. I've never believed in broadcasting for plays. I wish to God I'd never touched this one with the tongs. I'm not used to this kind of treatment, Caird, I tell you. If this is the way in which you're in the habit of treating artists ——" He broke off. Over Caird's shoulders he could see two men walking slowly along the passage towards them. The first was General Farquharson, looking very grim, and behind him was a lean young man in a dark blue serge suit, carrying a bowler hat.

They halted, and there was a moment's silence.

"I'm extraordinarily sorry that you should all have been inconvenienced," said the General gravely. "But it was unfortunately necessary that you should all wait for the arrival of this gentleman. He has a few questions to ask all of you."

"And who the devil——" began Dryden.

"No, no, not quite as bad as that!" said the newcomer, putting down his bowler hat and taking a notebook out of his pocket. "My name is Spears—Detective Inspector Spears of Scotland Yard."

To Rodney Fleming, who thought of himself not only as a young man about town and a most promising author, but also as a student of human psychology, the reaction among the little group in the waiting room to the arrival of Inspector Spears was of absorbing interest. Even he himself, though he knew of the murder and had anticipated the appearance of the police, would have confessed to a tautening of his nervous system when face to face with a representative of Scotland Yard in the flesh. Isabel put one hand to her breast and went so white that he was afraid she was going to faint; but Ian Macdonald only said, "I'm glad to see you, sir," in precisely the same way as he had been known on a former occasion to greet a dusky potentate paying a visit of inspection to the studios. It was a little disappointing that Leopold Dryden should so ostentatiously have taken the cue for his next scene, for take it he did, with unexceptionable technique. He paused just long enough to allow Spears's introduction to "register" in the minds of the others; then walked up to General Farquharson and looked him very straight in the eyes.

"Scotland Yard," he repeated witheringly. "Indeed. Most interesting. So I've been kept waiting about here to be questioned by the police, because some lady has mislaid her handbag, or a ten-shilling note is missing from the gentlemen's lavatory! Luckily one of the board of governors of this corporation is a member of my club. You've not heard the last of this, I can tell you."

The General did not blink an eyelash in the face of this tirade.

"Mr. Dryden," he said, "I have apologized to you for the inconvenience to which you have been put. You will realize the necessity for it, perhaps, when I add that a man, one of the company engaged in the play which you have just performed, met his death in one of the studios tonight."

Isabel uttered a stifled little cry, and Fleming caught her sharply by the wrist.

"Steady, Isabel," he whispered.

But Leopold Dryden was not to be daunted or thrown out of his stride when he had once adopted the reading of a part.

"Needless to say, I am more than distressed to hear of such a thing," he said, throwing back his head. "But it seems to me that you are doing your best here to turn tragedy into farce. Am I to understand seriously that my wife and I have been kept to be questioned by the police because some poor devil has been unlucky enough to die on your premises?" His tone changed from indignation to deepest sarcasm. "Or perhaps you believe it to be a case of murder, and propose to arrest me on suspicion. Is that it?"

"It *may be* murder," said Spears quietly.

Dryden recoiled a step. For a moment the arrogant assurance left his face, and he looked worn and tired.

At that moment Isabel got up from the sofa and put her hand through his arm. The touch of her fingers seemed to act upon him like the voice of a prompter, for he patted her hand and turned back almost fiercely to the detective.

"Well, suppose it *is* murder," he said. "Do you suggest that I or my wife have anything to do with it? Do you propose to question us at this time of night, just after a performance, when we are both dead-beat? I didn't know you'd been driven to fall back on third-degree methods at Scotland Yard. I can tell you this, Inspector Spears, you've no right whatsoever to detain us unless you choose to put us under arrest. And I don't imagine you're impudent enough or stupid enough to do that. I shall be glad to be at home to you tomorrow morning, if you call upon us at our flat, at a reasonable hour—I mean not before eleven o'clock in the morning. You'll find the address in the telephone book." And holding Isabel's arm tightly within his own, he walked past the General and Spears along the passage to the lift without looking back.

"Should I hold them?" enquired Ian Macdonald impassively.

Spears shook his head.

"I think I'll let him cool off. There's plenty to see to here. I'd best get myself familiar with your box of tricks, Mr. Caird, and find how the land lies. I can do my questioning in the morning."

Rodney Fleming stood up and brushed cigarette ash off the lapels of his dinner jacket.

"Then can I go home?" he enquired.

"If you don't mind, I'd like you and Mr. Caird with me," said Spears. "As I understand it, you were on two of the loose ends of this play, and I'd like to know how it looked from the various points of view. But first of all I'll go back to the studio where the body was found. They should have finished taking the photographs by now."

"Just as you like, Inspector," said the General. "I'll leave you in charge, Caird. I think the inspector should see that man Higgins before he goes. I shall want you in my office first thing in the morning, before I go in to see the director-general. What a thing to have happened here! I can hardly believe it, even now. Goodnight." And he walked briskly down the corridor.

CHAPTER VII

EXAMINATION OF THE BODY

LIKE most busy men with only limited time for reading, Julian Caird was a great reader of detective stories. Brought up on *Raffles, Arsene Lupin, Sherlock Holmes,* and *Trent's Last Case,* he now devoured the exploits and debated the respective merits of Inspector French, Colonel Gore, Poirot, and Lord Peter Wimsey. But somehow not all his familiarity with the fiction of crime had prepared him for the extraordinarily matter-of-fact methods with which Spears, his sergeant, his divisional surgeon, and a couple of photographers dealt with what had once been Sidney Parsons.

Studio 7C, with its artificially padded walls, its uniform grey colour, was clearly appropriate for the setting of the scene. Leopold Dryden, thought Fleming, would have appreciated it. The only furnishing consisted of a sofa, three or four small metal and canvas chairs, a round black table, on which stood a water carafe and a glass, and a microphone fixed head high on a four-legged stand.

When Spears and his companions entered the studio, the photographers were just packing up their apparatus. There was a strong smell of magnesium flares, and smoke was still curling about the ceiling. The body of Parsons lay where it had been found, almost under the microphone, but now it was decently covered with a rug. The sergeant stood by the little table, on which he was sorting out with deliberation the contents of the dead man's pockets. The divisional surgeon, a lantern-jawed individual with pince-nez, a shock of white hair, and quite astonishingly shiny trousers, was sitting on the sofa scribbling on the back of an envelope with a pencil.

"Hello, Spears," he said, looking up. "You hardly need have bothered to spoil my beauty sleep for this. I suppose there'll have to be an autopsy as a matter of form, but the thing's clear as daylight."

"Well?" asked Spears.

The medical man peered at his pencilled scribble.

"Strangled from behind," he said. "The fellow who did the strangling wore gloves. I don't need you to tell me that, Spears. I'm sure there's not much argument about when he was killed——"

"We must have heard him die!" said Caird excitedly.

"No jumping to conclusions, please, Mr. Caird," said Spears reprovingly. "You *think* you heard him die in your play, don't you? Suppose he didn't play his death scene himself?"

"By jove, that's an idea!" said Rodney Fleming.

"We don't *know* anything yet," said Spears. "I'm just looking for facts at present. How long's he been dead, Arbuthnot?"

"I've told you before, Spears," said the surgeon, "only fools pretend to answer that question accurately.

But he's not been dead more than two hours, I can tell you that. He didn't take much killing, poor little brute. Wretchedly undernourished; poor physique; and the worst set of teeth I've seen for years."

"I knew Parsons was in rather a bad way," said Fleming. "I knew him slightly—recommended him to Caird for the part because I knew he was so damned hard up."

"Thanks," said Spears. "You can tell me more about that later. Anything else, Arbuthnot?"

"I don't think so—nothing useful."

"Have you got your photographs?" asked Spears, turning to the other two men.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You can get along. Send the two men you will find in the hall up for the body. Now, Sergeant, have you searched the studio?"

The detective sergeant, Ring by name, was a thin, foxy-faced man, with bulging pale blue eyes and slim hands which looked as if they should have belonged to a pianist rather than to a policeman.

"You can see for yourself, sir," he said. "This room's as bare as a board. The carpet's too thick to take any impression, and whoever did this job knew too much to leave anything behind him. Here are the contents of the pockets, sir."

Spears walked over to the table, and as Caird watched the detective fingering dispassionately one little object after another, he was again conscious of that strange sense of the pathetic which had struck him when he and the General had confronted the studio attendant on the staircase. There was something indescribably wretched and forlorn about the little pile of coppers; the paper packet of ten Players cigarettes, three-quarters empty; the indubitable pawn ticket; the soiled handkerchief; the three loose keys on a piece of knotted string; the chewed stump of pencil; and the shabby pigskin pocketbook—so obviously sole relic of very distant better days—containing a few grubby papers and a solitary ten-shilling note. Who on earth, thought Caird, could have found it in his heart to strike down such an insignificant weakling, an opponent so blatantly ill equipped? What motive could there possibly be for the sudden throttling of a creature so patently set towards the Embankment and the doss house? He turned to Fleming with a shiver.

"I suppose you find it interesting, Rodney," he muttered. "But personally it gives me the creeps to see Spears fingering that poor devil's things as if he were choosing kidneys for breakfast."

"You've got a note of the contents of the pockets, Sergeant?" said Spears.

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. What's this, Mr. Caird?" He held out a wad of mimeographed sheets, tied together with pink tape at the top left-hand corner. There were about fifty sheets of this paper, which had something of the substance and feel of blotting paper.

Caird raised his eyebrows.

"That's a script of the play," he said. "Our actors read their parts, you know. They don't have to learn 'em."

"It was lying just beside the body, sir," put in Sergeant Ring.

Spears sat with the script in his hands, staring at it.

"That's my play all right," said Rodney Fleming lightly. "There's the title on the outside page, and everything."

"Exactly," said Spears. "Perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Caird, if it is usual for your actors to mutilate their scripts?"

"Mutilate them? They scribble on them sometimes —make notes or cue marks in the margin. Why?"

Spears held out the script.

"Either Mr. Parsons, or someone else," he said slowly, "has torn half the outside sheet of this away. It was torn in a hurry, for the edges are jagged. I wonder why."

CHAPTER VIII

INTRODUCES STEWART EVANS

RATHER more than an hour later, when Caird and Fleming were almost reconciled to spending the rest of the night as initiators of the detective into the mysteries of Broadcasting House, Spears slipped an elastic band round his notebook and put it into his pocket.

"I won't bother you any more now, gentlemen," he said. "I think you've shown me about as much as I can absorb."

They had visited the D.C. room and studios; they had explored passages and examined mechanism, until Rodney Fleming for one was heartily sick and tired of the whole performance, and beneath his breath had consigned the thoroughgoing methods of Scotland Yard to the deeps of hell.

Now once more they were standing outside the door of 7C.

"I'll begin my questioning of individuals as to their separate movements tomorrow morning," said Spears. "I'll begin with the Drydens, as they were good enough to give me an appointment, and perhaps I could see you two gentlemen?"

"I'll be at your disposal whenever you like," said Caird.

"Thank you, Mr. Caird. And Mr. Fleming?"

Rodney Fleming nodded and lit the last cigarette from his case.

"I suppose," Spears went on, "it wouldn't be possible for me to get something to eat? I was home late and got called out again before I could get at my supper."

"My dear Inspector," said Fleming, "there's one advantage about having to detect crime in this sort of wholesale establishment. I doubt if you'll get champagne, but the canteen's excellent; I know it well."

"I'll tell you what," said Caird. "We don't want to go down to the canteen and eat under the eyes of a lot of variety artists waiting for an empire transmission. We'll go into one of the listening halls and I'll have some coffee and sandwiches sent in to us."

The night-service lift dropped them to the basement floor, and Caird led the way into listening hall No. 1. Rodney Fleming threw himself into one of the deep armchairs with undisguised satisfaction. Spears stared about him, frankly bewildered by this queer room with its modern furniture and decoration, its lighting so self-consciously subdued, and its big loud speaker raised on a platform in front of a carefully designed modernist scene indicating two blocks of skyscrapers and a stretch of river.

"Make yourself comfortable, Inspector," said Caird. "This is where we put distinguished listeners, press representatives, and other swells, when we want them to hear our stuff as it really ought to sound. I'll go along to the canteen and order the food."

He turned right-handed along the passage towards the canteen and stopped abruptly.

"Hullo, Evans," he said. "What the deuce are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I happened to be working late," said Stewart Evans, without troubling to disguise the insolence in his voice.

He and Caird disliked each other heartily, and unfortunately Evans was one of Caird's departmental subordinates. He was older than Caird and took few pains to conceal the fact that he had little respect for Caird's authority and none for his judgment. He was a tubby little man, already growing bald; undoubtedly clever; emphatically ambitious; but cursed with a record of failure in various lines of activity, all of which could be traced to his temperamental inability to get on with his fellow men. He belonged to a small specialized section of Caird's department, whose members devoted themselves to the composition and production of programmes which did not come within any of the usual categories of drama, music, talks, and so forth. Members of Programme Research, as they were called, had considerable latitude in methods and hours of work. They were extremely valuable members of the programme branch and were equivalently difficult as an administrative problem, as Caird, with whom ultimate responsibility for their work lay, knew to his cost.

"I heard your play tonight," Evans went on. "I'll admit you can handle that stuff, Caird. But how you reconcile it with your conscience to put it on at all, beats me. Baroness Orczy and water, by God! Why the hell not give 'em *East Lynne* and have done with it? Do you think you're catering for the disciples of the Salvation Army?"

"My dear Evans," said Caird, "I don't want to be offensive, but sometimes—and particularly when I'm very tired, as I am now—I wish you'd mind your own business. I put on *The Scarlet Highwayman* because I believe there are a lot of listeners who like it. But if it's any satisfaction to you, I wish to God I'd never touched the damned thing."

"Conscience pricking?" enquired Evans.

"Oh, rot!" snarled Caird. "You'll know all about it in the morning. What have you been working on? You aren't usually in the habit of burning this amount of midnight oil."

"I like to work in my office at night," said Evans. "The atmosphere's sympathetic. No telephone calls; no idiots coming in to ask me why I haven't initialled a lot of tomfool forms. I can get something done. Goodnight, Caird." And he trotted away.

Caird ordered some sandwiches and coffee and went back to the listening hall. Rodney Fleming was lying back in his chair almost asleep. Spears was sitting very upright in a tubular-steel chair, studying his notes.

"Food in a minute," said Caird, with a forced joviality he was far from feeling. "Hullo, Gerald. What is it?"

The door had burst open, and a distracted-looking young man in a dinner jacket came into the listening hall.

"Hullo, Julian. I didn't know you were staying up to hear the result of your efforts."

"What do you mean?" said Caird. "Oh—Rodney, this is Mr. Rylands, one of our empire-service announcers—Mr. Fleming, and—er—er, Mr. Spears."

"All," said Rylands, "must be forgiven to the artistic temperament. We blattnerphoned the transmission of *The Scarlet Highwayman* and we are transmitting it to the empire in—" he glanced at his wrist watch—"exactly seven minutes' time. I just wanted to see that the loud speaker had been plugged in in here. I must just telephone to Control Room," and he vanished into the telephone box in the corner of the listening hall.

Spears looked puzzled.

"Blatternerphone?" he said.

"Yes," said Caird slowly. "It's a way of recording a programme on a steel tape so that it can be retransmitted. We have to do a good deal of it for empire work."

"Retransmitted?" repeated Spears. "Do you mean to say that——"

Rodney Fleming sat up.

"By Jove!"

"Of course," said Julian Caird. "I never thought of it. What a fool I am! I was only thinking how maddening it was that here you had a crime with almost any number of witnesses, and as none of them would have known it was a crime, their evidence wouldn't be an earthly. But as it is——"

Spears smacked his fist on the desk in front of him.

"You mean you've got the play recorded?" he said, and even in his voice there was a thrill of excitement. "You mean we can hear that actual scene over again?"

"We can hear that scene," said Caird, "not only over again, but over and over again. As often as you like. I wonder if the murderer thought of that?"

CHAPTER IX

EXAMINATION OF ISABEL

LEOPOLD and Isabel Dryden lived in a flat in Upper St. Martin's Lane. Spears called there at precisely eleven o'clock on the morning of the day following the tragedy at Broadcasting House. Although he had not got to bed until nearly six and had been in his office at Scotland Yard by nine; and although every news bill between Whitehall and Seven Dials had screamed "Death at Broadcasting House" in enormous red type, he looked as usual the embodiment of briskness and efficiency.

A white-coated manservant answered the door and led him up a flight of uncarpeted stairs, past two suites of office, and through an inner door which separated the Drydens' flat from the rest of the building. Ultimately Spears found himself shown into the dining room, offered a cigarette, and asked to wait. He sat down, looked about him, and not for the first time wondered why the members of the theatrical profession seemed invariably to live such remarkable private lives.

Out in the streets it had seemed unusually hot, but in the dining room Spears felt chilled to the bone. For it was decorated entirely in white. It had bare white walls, white curtains of American cloth, artificial flowers, made for the most part of wax and white feathers, on the mantelpiece. Spears's gloomy impression of a morgue was intensified by the heavy table in the middle of the room, consisting of a single malachite slab, supported on curiously carved white legs; far more appropriate, thought Spears, for the laying out of a body than the laying of a meal. Over the mantelpiece, a singularly vital charcoal sketch of Leopold Dryden as Iago in *Othello* leered down at him sardonically. . . .

The door opened, and Isabel Dryden came in.

It was clear that her night's sleep, too, had been short, and Spears thought she had been crying. But the shadows under her eyes and the general air of agitation which she made no attempt to conceal only accentuated her fair prettiness. She was skilfully made up and beautifully dressed, but Spears noticed a slight disorder about her hair, a lack of polish on her tinted nails, and stockings that did not quite tone with the pair of shoes she was wearing. It was as if she had begun to armour herself for the interview, but somehow had lost conviction in her ability to carry it off before the job was completed.

"Please don't get up," she said at once. "Mr. Spears, I can't tell you how dreadful I'm feeling about all this."

"Of course," said Spears soothingly. "It must have been a great shock. It was actually your husband I came to see this morning."

Isabel bit her lip.

"I'm afraid he can't see you," she said in a low voice.

"Can't, Mrs. Dryden? Or won't?"

"Oh, you're thinking of his attitude last night. Please don't. He's—he's rather used to getting his own way———"

"No doubt," Spears interrupted, "he indulges his temperament, like all artists."

"Exactly," said Isabel. "Besides, he was ill; and this morning he didn't feel equal to getting up. I've rung up his doctor, and he's coming to see him before lunch."

"Of course he realizes," said Spears, "that he will have to tell the facts he knows about this matter, if not to me, to a coroner. Most people prefer to avoid that sort of publicity, but I suppose Leopold Dryden is used to being featured in the newspapers."

Isabel flushed.

"But he has nothing to tell you!" she said. "How could he have? He was in the studio all through the play, and, as I told you, he was feeling wretchedly ill. You must have seen for yourself that he was in pain, and you can take my word for it, Mr. Spears, he was far too anxious about whether he would be able to last out the broadcast to be able to pay attention to anything but the handling of his part."

"Well," said Spears briskly, "perhaps you would be good enough to remind him that he'll have to give evidence at the inquest, and it'll probably be to his advantage to see me beforehand. If he—er—feels well enough to talk to me this evening, or tomorrow, perhaps you would telephone me at Scotland Yard? Meanwhile, I should like to ask *you* a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Of course," said Isabel. "But I'm afraid there's nothing I can tell you. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"By all means," said Spears, slipping out a notebook. "First of all, Mrs. Dryden, did you know this Sidney Parsons?"

"As an actor, yes," said Isabel.

"You had acted with him before?"

"No, never. I only meant that I knew of him as an actor. He had been on the stage some time, and I think I had heard of him as a member of the Thespian Club."

"Did you like him?"

"It was hardly a question of liking, Mr. Spears. I had only seen him in the course of this broadcast play, and it wasn't as if we had any scenes together—he was just one of the cast."

"I see. And nothing happened during the course of rehearsals to give you an idea that another member of the cast disliked him?"

"Oh, no. He was a quiet, rather shabby little man. I don't think he spoke much to anybody, and he really only had that one scene, which he played by himself in that separate studio. So he spent most of rehearsals in sitting about reading a newspaper."

Spears nodded. He was watching Isabel carefully, and in spite of her straightforward, almost glib answers, her lips and hands were damning evidence of apprehension that could not be put down altogether to the fact that she was being questioned by a detective as a matter of routine.

"Have you any idea, Mrs. Dryden, what it was that upset your husband last night?"

"Upset? Do you mean, what had he had for dinner?"

"Yes—if you think that it was his food that upset him. But it seemed to me, Mrs. Dryden, that although he was certainly not normal, the disturbance was rather emotional than physical."

He paused for an instant, and then shot out:

"I suppose you're on good terms with your husband?"

"I don't see that you've any right to ask me that question!" retorted Isabel with spirit. "Leo and I have been married for four years. Stage marriages seldom last as long as that, if they're unsuccessful. We don't believe in that particular sort of conventional misery."

Spears said nothing, merely lifted his eyebrows, waiting for more. The pause had the desired effect. More came.

"As you said yourself, Mr. Spears, Leo is temperamental, like all great artists. I'm not pretending that we're candidates for the Dunmow Flitch, you know."

"In fact, your husband is, perhaps, inclined to be jealous? I think I've heard gossip to that effect."

"Yes, he is jealous," said Isabel. "But a man who's in love with his wife should be jealous, don't you think so? But he wasn't jealous of Sidney Parsons, if that's what you mean." She smiled and stubbed out her cigarette into a white ashtray.

"Which," thought Spears, "looks to me uncommonly like a smile of relief after trailing a red herring . . ."

"I'm sorry to harp on this point, Mrs. Dryden, but could his demeanour last night have been accounted for by one of those periodical attacks of jealousy?"

"No. We had a cheese savoury at dinner, and I think it had disagreed with him."

"Nothing happened, at any rate, apart from the food? I would much rather hear it from you, Mrs. Dryden, than from your servants."

It was a flagrant shot in the dark, but Spears was banking on the strange way in which people are inclined to forget or ignore their servants when engaged in a domestic quarrel.

Isabel was moistening her lips with her tongue.

"Well, I *will* tell you," she said. "But don't begin to draw false conclusions from it, because it's absurd. My husband and I *did* quarrel at dinner—nothing serious!"

"What in other circles they call 'having words,' perhaps?" said Spears helpfully.

Isabel nodded.

"It was only that someone had written me a silly letter, and I was foolish enough to show it to Leo. He lost his temper—he's always touchy in hot weather—and rather implied that it was my fault that anyone should have written me such a letter. We were both a little nervous about this play—we had never done any broadcasting before. We got rather childishly heated about it."

"This letter," repeated Spears thoughtfully. "Was it a love letter?"

"I suppose you might call it that."

"Would you mind showing it to me?"

"I'm afraid I tore it up."

"Was it an answer to one of yours, Mrs. Dryden?"

Isabel jumped up.

"I told you, Mr. Spears—or at any rate, I thought you realized—that this was a silly sort of letter that any actress is liable to get from a perfect stranger. How can any of this affect the horrible thing that happened last night? I'm sorry, I suppose you're hardened to horrors. But to someone like myself, the shock was desperate. I've hardly slept at all, and I'm really worried about my husband."

Spears leaned forward, with one elbow on the malachite top of the table.

"Mrs. Dryden," he said, "you must believe me when I say that I sympathize with you. But I have my duty to do. I'm trying to get to the bottom of a very difficult case. I need all the help I can get. Active hindrance may have to be construed as participation in the crime after the act."

Isabel swayed a little on her feet.

"I don't know what you mean!" she whispered.

"Your husband refuses to see me," Spears went on remorselessly. "It's possible that he may be ill. I shall be able to judge of that in twenty-four hours or so, or as soon as I can get in touch with his doctor. You, probably from the best possible motives in the world, are deliberately doing your best to mislead me. You said that your husband was in the studio during the whole of the broadcast. I know for a fact that he was out of that studio for at least five minutes. You admitted only under pressure that he was a jealous man. I know that his jealousy concerning you is one of the principal table topics of theatrical London. Again, it was only under pressure that you admitted that you had quarrelled with your husband yesterday evening at dinner. Finally, I believe you have told me a deliberate falsehood with regard to this letter which you say was written to you by a perfect stranger. Do you still assert that that letter was not one written to you in reply to one of your own?"

Isabel took a step forward.

"I've done my best," she said, "to be patient. But you've gone too far, Mr. Spears. However much you may think you've wrapped it up, you've called me a liar to my face. I don't choose that anyone should do that in my own house." She turned to the bell.

"Before you ring," said Spears, "would you mind looking at this?"

He put a piece of folded notepaper on the table.

"Do you still deny in the face of this that it was in answer to this letter, or one like it, that the letter came which you showed to your husband?"

Isabel turned, and Spears stood up and held out the letter towards her.

For an instant she stared at it, and then her eyes widened with stark terror. She made a feeble, half-hearted little snatch at the letter, and then, as Spears stepped back, burst into tears and stumbled blindly out of the room.

Spears rang the bell.

"Would you mind giving me the name and address of Mr. Dryden's doctor?" he said to the manservant when he appeared.

"Dr. Chesney, sir—243, Wimpole Street."

"Thank you," said Spears. "After he has seen Mr. Dryden, would you kindly let him have my card and ask him to telephone me?"

He picked up his hat and clattered briskly down the uncarpeted stairs into the glare of the sunlit street.

CHAPTER X

BANNISTER HAS AN IDEA

IT IS regrettable, but true, that little work was done in Broadcasting House that morning. Members of the staff, who had read of the death of Sidney Parsons in their morning papers and had hurried officewards from their haddock or eggs and bacon, found themselves the embarrassed cynosures of a considerable gathering outside the Langham Hotel and the Round Church. A special force of police had to be drafted to Portland Place; a special meeting of the board of governors was convened; and at eleven o'clock, in the concert hall, the director of internal administration addressed the whole staff on the subject of studio discipline and relations with the press. Reporters swarmed in the entrance hall, badgering the reception clerk almost out of his wits; while their editors simultaneously, by their continual telephone calls, compelled the head of the section responsible for liaison with the newspapers to give his secretary a formula of *non possumus,* and himself to take his departure hurriedly for Margate. Meanwhile, the sculptured replicas of Prospero and Ariel stared incuriously upon the dumbly gazing crowd of sightseers, who waited for they knew not what; and overhead, hardly toning with the bright blue sky, the corporation's blue flag fluttered gaily in the sunshine. . . .

Following upon the official address in the concert hall—an address which he felt to be directed most unfairly against his own devoted department—Julian Caird retired to his office on the fourth floor, sat down at his desk, and bit savagely at his penholder. His stenographer tactfully found something to occupy her elsewhere and left him alone. He stared out across Portland Place into the windows of the nursing home on the other side of the road, and wished fervently that he were a strong silent man; for this business promised to be the very devil, reflecting upon himself in particular, several people whom he knew well, and the corporation in general. And Caird was old-fashioned in so far that he was jealous of his own reputation, fond of his friends, and loyal to the organization which paid his salary. He knew perfectly well that he ought to be spending his time in drawing up a schedule of dramatic productions for the last three months of the year. He also knew perfectly well that he had neither the wish nor the power of concentration to do anything of the kind.

"Why the hell," he muttered to himself, "did I ever accept the blasted play?"

Actually he knew well enough. He had been sitting in his office about three months before, when Rodney Fleming had called to see him. He had known Fleming some years before, when they were both unsuccessful touring actors. They had actually lived together on one tour, for Caird had found something considerably sympathetic in another member of the company who preferred to spend his time, in Newcastle, Leeds, Nottingham, Blackpool, and the South Coast towns, in writing plays and short stories, rather than in the less edifying occupations common to most touring companies. For a time they had kept in touch; then Fleming had begun to achieve some reputation as a writer, and Caird had joined the B. B. C., and they had hardly seen each other again until Fleming walked into Caird's office and asked for permission to attend rehearsals of one or two broadcast plays. Six weeks later he submitted the manuscript of *The Scarlet Highwayman.*

"Of course you won't believe it, Julian," Fleming had said, slamming down the manuscript on the middle of Caird's desk, "but I've been the perfect listener. I've heard every play that's been broadcast since you took over the job of directing them. And I don't mind telling you most of them are rotten. I don't say this is a masterpiece, but it's strong dramatic stuff."

"Just tell me," Caird had interrupted, looking at Fleming shrewdly, "why you've taken the trouble to write the thing and bring it to me?"

"Not for what you'll pay me, certainly!" Fleming had retorted. "But I know what I'm doing. Leopold Dryden's accepted a play of mine and is going to produce it at the Princess's in the autumn, and I've written this broadcast thing for him. If you do it, it's first-rate publicity for me and for Dryden as a combination. Besides, I'm only beginning to get my foot in as a playwright. I want all the advertisement I can beg, borrow, or steal. All right, Julian, don't look so dreary. I'm not trying to palm nonsense off on you because I happen once to have known you rather well. This play's the goods compared with most of what you do. You can hack it about as you like, but I want a say in the casting, and I want to come to rehearsals. So long." And he had lounged out of the office, leaving behind him an impression of elegance, amiability, and cynical egoism which it had irritated Caird profoundly to find justified when he read the script of the play. For the play, of its kind, was good. There was no doubt about it. It told a good story, and it was cleverly adapted to the rather elaborate technique of the microphone, the dramatic control panel, and multiple studios. Rodney Fleming had evidently taken trouble to learn all there was to be learned about broadcast plays. And so the play had been accepted for production. . . .

Someone knocked on the door of Caird's office and entered simultaneously.

"May I come in?" enquired Guy Bannister.

The head of Caird's effects section was a lean spectacled youth, with a shock of untidy fair hair and a most misleading expression of melancholy. He had been Caird's fag at his public school and accordingly was on rather more intimate terms with him than his official position in the corporation warranted.

"Are you busy, Julian?"

Caird shook his head.

"Anything but," he observed grimly. "Sit down, Guy. Have a cigarette. What is it?"

Guy refused the proffered Egyptian and took out a packet of Players.

"You know, Julian," he said, "I've been thinking about last night's business."

"You surprise me," murmured Caird.

"No—but bar rotting, I have—and I don't understand the methods of your friend the detective. Of course, it's all very well, this 'method' and that sort of thing—and I don't pretend to know what's at the back of his mind—but———"

"Are you proposing to do his job for him, Guy?"

"Of course not. But there *are* one or two things. First of all about that man Higgins."

"Well? Did Spears see him?"

"Did Spears see him?" repeated Bannister. "I should damn' well think he did. I had to stop till he'd finished, and it was almost exactly three o'clock when we left here. Of course, I wasn't in the room while he questioned him."

"Why?"

"Only this," said Guy, with the air of a conjuror producing a rabbit from a hat, "Higgins was supposed to be on duty on the sixth and seventh floor again this morning. Evans had a rehearsal call for the production of *As You Like It* on Sunday week. Well, I know everything's at sixes and sevens—and there was that show in the concert hall—and if Higgins was grilled until the small hours of this morning it wasn't surprising that he wasn't on tap here at half-past nine. But I've just been up on that floor again. Higgins hasn't shown up at all today."

"Oh, he's probably overslept," said Caird.

"Of course, he might have," said Bannister. "But there's another thing which Macdonald's just told me. Did you know that Higgins had a flaming row with Parsons during the rehearsals of *The Scarlet Highwayman?*"

There was a short silence, and outside in Portland Place a heavy lorry thundered past.

"Go on," said Caird.

"It was the third or fourth rehearsal," said Bannister. "The first day you stopped taking the cast in the studio and went up on to the Panel. As you know, Parsons had that scene in 7C to himself. Well, there's that regulation about taking hats and coats into the studio. Parsons for some reason chose to disregard it, went into the studio with his hat and coat, and put them on the sofa. It seems that Higgins saw them in there and proposed to take them downstairs to the cloakroom."

"Well?"

"Well, Parsons abused him with a good deal of pretty filthy language, I gather. Told him to mind his own business, and pretty nearly threw him out. Higgins, very naturally and properly, went down to Ian Macdonald in 6A."

"And he," said Caird, "very typically went to 7C, told Parsons not to be an ass, and didn't even bother to tell me there'd been any trouble at all."

"Exactly," said Bannister and grinned.

Caird dropped the bitten penholder into his pentray.

"Yes, Guy, that's all very well," he said. "But are you trying to pin this onto Higgins?"

"I'm not trying to pin anything onto anybody," said Bannister. "But it's a bit queer. As you saw yourself when you went down from the panel room to 6A during the transmission, he wasn't on that door when he should have been. He didn't stay outside the studio on guard when you told him to. He was looking like death—and after being cross-examined by a detective he doesn't turn up this morning."

"He'd got a perfectly good story about this girl," said Caird.

"I should hardly describe it as either perfect or good," said Bannister. "But then you never had any morals, Julian, had you?"

Caird got up abruptly.

"Well, Guy, we can theorize as much as we like. Personally, I believe in leaving things to the police. It's their job. Though I suppose you could always track down the miserable Higgins, if you feel that way."

"I'm sorry if I bore you," said Bannister, moving to the door. "Perhaps I *will* take a cast in the direction of the Higgins home. If I'm getting hot, I'll let you know. And look here, Julian, there's just one more thing. Did you realize that the performance of *The Scarlet Highwayman* had been blattnerphoned for the empire service?"

"I know it, Inspector Spears knows it, and I imagine most of the London press knows it by now," said Caird savagely. "What about it?"

"Oh, very well," said Bannister, opening the door. "I only thought it might be helpful and we might perhaps pick up a clue if we heard that strip of steel tape played over again."

"My dear Guy," said Julian Caird, "you're a capital chap, and I like you very much, but we're not all the blazing fools you'd like to make out. If you ask Ian Macdonald, he'll tell you that, at the request of Inspector Spears, I have arranged for that particular blatternerphone recording to be played over again to us this evening in Listening Hall No. 1 at five o'clock precisely. If you're very good, and don't try any more to cast me for Dr. Watson, I'll ask Spears if you can come."

But Guy Bannister was impervious to sarcasm.

"That's fine, Julian," he said. "I'll be there."

And as was his usual custom, he slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XI

VOICE FROM THE DEAD

THE special replay of the blattnerphone recording of *The Scarlet Highwayman,* arranged at the request of Inspector Spears, did not take place at five o'clock that afternoon, after all. An actor might have died in a studio and Broadcasting House might hum with rumours and theories, but the service supplied to its listeners by the British Broadcasting Corporation had to be continued without pause or qualification. It was sufficiently bad that the second performance of the play on the national wavelength had had to be postponed and a substitute found, and that the majority of the personnel of the dramatic department, either from shock or curiosity, had been rendered almost incapable for the time being of carrying out their normal functions. Any further disorganization of routine was out of the question. As the blattnerphone machines were in particular demand for the empire service, Caird was instructed to ring up Spears and ask him if he would mind if the replay was postponed until later that night, when one of the machines would be free. And to this Spears, who was very fully occupied with various other aspects of the case, consented.

It was therefore a little after eleven o'clock when he returned to Broadcasting House and was immediately conducted to Listening Hall No. 1, where he found waiting for him the controller, Caird, Desmond Hancock, Guy Bannister, Rodney Fleming, and Ian Macdonald. It was a silent, uneasy gathering that he found. Even the General's geniality had worn thin under the day's strain. The governors had been difficult; the press entirely damnable; and he was not pleased at the prospect of a second late night. Attempts by Caird and the irrepressible Bannister to promote light conversation had failed dismally, and Rodney Fleming alone seemed at his ease. He sat rather apart from the others, very dapper in his double-breasted dinner jacket, with his carefully brushed smooth black hair, and a slightly cynical smile on his face behind the smoke of his cigarette.

"Ah, here you are, Inspector," said the General. "Come along, Caird, ring up Control Room and let's get on with it. I confess I can hardly see myself what you expect to get out of this—er—experiment." And he glared at Bannister through his glass.

Caird vanished into the telephone box.

"I imagine it's only that one scene—the murder scene—that you want," drawled Fleming.

Spears nodded.

Caird reappeared, crossed to the loud speaker and switched it on.

"It'll be through in a minute, sir."

"Was it quite necessary for all these gentlemen to be present?" asked the General.

"I left it to Mr. Caird to decide who should be present," said Spears.

"Well, Caird?"

"Well, sir, as you know, I was not in the panel room at the moment when the tragedy occurred. I was down in 6A talking to Macdonald about the failure of the return light. So I thought Hancock should be here, as he heard the actual scene played. Bannister and Macdonald are more accustomed to hearing blattnerphone recordings than anyone else, as part of their regular work, and they might spot something that a casual listener would not. I invited Mr. Fleming as being the author of the play, and because he, too, was present at the performance last night."

"You mean in the dramatic control room?" said the General.

"No, sir—in the 6A listening room."

"Why was he there, Caird? I thought you made such a point of never admitting anyone to those listening rooms except on staff business."

"Well, sir, the panel room's about the worst place for an author to listen to his play, with all the distractions of knobs twisting and switches flicking."

"And the producer swearing," put in Fleming gently from his corner.

The General smiled, and Caird was encouraged to go on.

"In the normal course of events I would have put Rodney into this listening hall, but as he happened to be expecting an urgent telephone message and they could put it through easily to the 6A listening room, I put him in there. Besides, there's another thing, sir. Fleming was very anxious to see how some of the play was done in a studio, and that listening room is the only place where you can both hear the whole of a broadcast play and simultaneously watch such scenes as are played in 6A studio through the glass panel."

"I see," grunted the General. "It seems to me very irregular, and I don't think it had better happen again. What's happened to this infernal tape?"

The loud speaker answered him. There was a curious low hiss, a sound very similar to that of a gramophone record working up to normal speed, and then the music of a minuet against a background of chattering voices filled the listening hall.

"What's that?" asked Spears.

"The end of the previous scene," said Caird. "The ballroom scene, which was played by the cast in 6A, with its music coming from the orchestra in 8A. It was because I got no return light from the conductor in 8A that I was afraid the return light from 6A might have gone also. That was why I left the panel room and bolted down to see Macdonald."

"We must have another talk about the complications of all these studios a little later on, Mr. Caird, if you don't mind," said Spears. "I haven't got the hang of it yet——"

"Sssssh!" said Guy Bannister suddenly. "Now for it! Listen, everyone."

The chatter and the minuet faded away, and there was a little pause.

"That's where I faded over from 6A and 8A into 7C," whispered Hancock. "Where Parsons was."

For a few seconds there was only the hiss of the running of the steel tape. Then a whining cockney voice, vibrant with passion, echoed weirdly through the darkened room. Almost furtively Caird looked round at the faces. Which of them, he wondered, shared his own feeling of horror—almost of incredulity—as they listened to this voice of a dead man?—a man whom most of them had seen alive and well a little over twenty-four hours ago, and whose corpse now lay on a mortuary slab under police guard. To Caird there had always seemed something repellent and almost indecent about the attempts of Spiritualists to pierce the veil of the hypothetical after-life and to drag back the voices of the dead to make suburban holidays over ouija boards and equivalent tomfooleries. Neither had he ever been able entirely to reconcile himself to the continued use, for purposes of entertainment, of the gramophone records of the voices of celebrated artists after their death. And though he had suggested the replay of this blattnerphone record of Parsons's murder, now that he actually heard it he experienced both fear and disgust, combined with an overwhelming conviction that the use of such a method must be unlucky and might well be something worse. . . .

The General sat bolt upright, fingering his moustache. Rodney Fleming stubbed out his cigarette, but otherwise displayed no emotion whatsoever. Guy Bannister leaned forward in his chair, his spectacles halfway down his nose, his hands gripped together with excitement. Macdonald and Bannister shared that expression of mingled strain and enjoyment common to people in a theatre or a concert hall. The whining cockney voice shrilled to the climax of its final speech.

". . . Didn't I tell you we'd get you one day? Didn't I swear, that day you rolled me over in the mud, that I'd be even with you yet?" A pause, and then: "Good—'eavens—you——" A gasp, a frightful choking gurgle, and then for a few seconds the hissing of the steel tape. That died away in its turn, and Caird crossed to the loud speaker and switched it off.

"I think that's all we wanted," he said. "After that we went back to a continuation of the ballroom scene."

For a few moments no one spoke.

"Well," said Rodney Fleming at last, taking out his cigarette case, "I call that pretty average gruesome."

"Well, Inspector, is there anything more we can do for you?" asked the General.

"I don't think so, thank you, sir," said Spears. "Except that I should like that bit of tape sealed up and kept so that I can hear it again if I want to. Can that be arranged?"

The General lifted an eyebrow.

"Certainly," he said. "If you really want it. I'll give instructions to the blattnerphone engineers myself. Naturally I'm not going to ask you now if you learned anything from this experiment, but I would be glad if you would telephone me in the morning. Good-night to you all."

He got up and marched out of the listening hall.

"Oh, damn all this Sandhurst-and-Staff-College good-mannery!" burst out Caird as the door closed.

"*Did* you get anything out of it? Personally, I was damned nearly sick. Poor bloody little man!"

"I'm not sure," said Spears. "It rather depends on one or two things which you may be able to tell me. But first of all, I know Sidney Parsons was little, but you're the second person today who's spoken of him pityingly. Why should you think of him as 'poor' or 'bloody'?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Caird. "He was obviously hard up, like most actors who are down on their luck. And in spite of *de mortuis* and all that, he wasn't a very nice creature. You know how matey actors are with one another? Well, he always sat by himself at the early rehearsals, and usually looked savage as well as seedy."

"H'm," said Spears. "Now, about this recording. If I'm to get any help from it, you must tell me a thing or two. First of all, did anything in it surprise you? You first, Mr. Caird."

Caird rubbed his jaw.

"I don't think there's anything I can say. But then, when you produce a play, the whole thing gets so infernally familiar to you that you end by only being able to listen to it with half your intelligence. The only thing that really struck me about the scene was that I've never heard it played half so well. I could never make Parsons put anything into it before. But this time, as Hancock told me last night, the goods were delivered."

"In the circumstances, hardly surprising," said Spears grimly. "How about you, Mr. Fleming?"

The latter shrugged elegantly.

"All authors are the same, Inspector. They notice only one thing: the way in which actors and producers mutilate what they write."

"What do you mean?"

"It's obviously quite unimportant, but as I wrote the scene, after 'I'd be even with you yet,' there was simply a pause, then 'You—the Scarlet High——' and then the gurgle as the gaoler was strangled."

"I thought this might arise," said Macdonald coolly. "I brought down the script with me."

"Hang the script!" said Caird. "Rodney's right. I know what authors are. I cut 'the Scarlet High——' myself. I thought it weakened the end of the speech."

"Do you mean to say," said Fleming, "that 'Good—'eavens' doesn't weaken it disgracefully?"

"I never put that in," said Caird. "Oh, I remember. Parsons asked me to let him have an exclamation just before the word 'you.' We had rather a row about it."

"A row about it?" repeated Spears. "How was it left finally?"

"He asked me to let him try it at the last rehearsal. I did. Needless to say, he promptly used 'Good God!' I told him he mustn't."

"Why was that?"

"Inappropriate and unnecessary," said Caird. "That's all. I see what happened. He started to say 'Good God!' last night, remembered I had told him he mustn't, watered it down by substituting ' 'eavens!' for 'God.' "

"And," interrupted Fleming, "promptly paid the penalty for misreading the author and disobeying the producer with his life."

"Shut up, Rodney!" said Caird.

Spears had taken the script of the play from Macdonald and was making pencil notes in the margin.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Yes!" burst out Guy Bannister. "Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what, Guy?"

"Immediately on top of the strangling?"

"There was nothing to hear."

"There was. And I heard it. You must have heard it—Macdonald, surely?"

The Scotsman shook his head.

"I was listening very carefully," he pronounced.

"I tell you there *was* something," said Bannister, getting up. "Only I can't tell you what the dickens it was."

"Why not try to describe it?" said Rodney Fleming, yawning.

"Don't know how to," said Bannister. "Might have been anything. I'm sorry to seem such an ass, Inspector. But you see, in this effects job of mine I know how different a thing can sound over the microphone from what it really is."

"Go on," said Spears. "Take your time."

"You see, in the old days when we started with sound effects, we did our best to make the real noise in front of the microphone. At Savoy Hill I believe it's true that people fired blank cartridges along the corridors, and even assembled the greater part of an aëroplane and then dropped it from the ceiling of the studio to get the effect of an aëroplane crash. Now we know better. We wreck ships by crumpling matchboxes, and create avalanches with a drum and a few potatoes."

"Very interesting," said Spears. "But——"

"Well, that's why I can't put an exact name to what I heard. If I give it a name, I may put you entirely on the wrong track, but I'll tell you what I think I heard. I believe it was the ticking of a watch."

There was a short silence.

"Sidney Parsons had not got a watch," said Ian Macdonald.

"Yes, don't you see?" said Bannister. "That's the murderer's watch we heard ticking."

"Thank you, Mr. Bannister," said Spears. "I call that pretty smart of you. But frankly at the moment I don't see how it can help us very much. Or are you going on to say that you can tell one watch from another over the microphone?"

"You might be able to," said Caird.

"You might," said Rodney Fleming, "if you could be sure of bringing the murderer's watch amongst others and putting them in front of the microphone for us all to hear. But I doubt if even Scotland Yard could manage that."

"I'm sorry," said Bannister.

"Don't be sorry, Mr. Bannister. These things may not be helpful right away, but they often turn out trumps in the long run. Have you any other ideas?"

Caird laughed.

"Go on, Guy!"

"No," said Bannister. "I *have* got another idea. But I think if you don't mind I'll keep it to myself for the present. Coming, Macdonald? Good-night, Julian."

"Are you going back to Scotland Yard, Inspector?" enquired Fleming. "If so, I can give you a lift. What about you, Julian?"

"I'll walk, thanks," said Caird. "There's something I want to do in my office before I leave. I'll just let Control Room know we've finished down here."

CHAPTER XII

CAIRD ACTS ON IMPULSE . . .

ONCE more left to himself, Caird wearily climbed the staircase inside the tower to the fourth floor of the building, passed through the door leading from the tower into the outside corridor, and made his way to his own office. There he sat down at his desk, lighted a pipe, and not for the first time wished that it was possible to obtain a brandy and soda within Broadcasting House; which it was not. He felt tired, depressed, and quite feverishly worried. For the more he thought about it, the more certain he felt from Spears's attitude that, in spite of the blattnerphone replay and other types of further investigation which might be put in hand, the detective was not really taking any of them very seriously. To Caird, a man of strong nervous imagination and a carefully cultivated dramatic instinct, it seemed clear that Spears had made up his mind. And if he had made up his mind, suspicion must be definitely fastened upon one of two persons. These two persons were the studio attendant, Higgins, and Leopold Dryden. . . .

Absent-mindedly, Caird took up a blue pencil and began to draw fantastic diagrams on his blotting pad. It was only about a quarter of an hour later that he realized what he was doing and recognized them for several extremely inaccurate attempts to reproduce the ground plan of the studios on the sixth and seventh floors. As to Higgins, unfeeling though it might sound, Caird did not mind particularly either way. Naturally he was sorry for him. It had been painful to watch his cringing embarrassment in the martial presence of the controller. But that story about the girl in the canteen had been as thin as tissue paper; and then there was Bannister's story of his quarrel with Parsons during rehearsal and the fact that he had not appeared at Broadcasting House at all that day. Caird wondered if Spears had put plain-clothesmen on his track already, and shivered a little at the thought of Higgins, shabby and hollow-cheeked, skulking through the meaner streets of the West End with hell in his heart and a hard-faced man in a bowler hat always twelve yards from his elbow. Still, if Higgins was guilty, the sooner he was caught, gaoled, and hanged, the better; for until the criminal was disposed of, existence in Broadcasting House was going to be no joke. Already, that day, people were beginning to look at one another in a most curious fashion, and for the first time Caird faced up to the realization that his unfortunate absence from the dramatic control room during those essential five minutes—a period during which he had passed the door of the studio in which the crime had taken place—must put himself on the list of suspects, however low down on that list. It would be intolerable to have to spend weeks in wondering, every time anyone glanced at you at all singularly, whether you were being regarded as a murderer. . . .

And then alternatively—Leopold Dryden. What the devil was Leo doing to be such an idiot; to stand on his dignity and get fresh with the police? Caird did not believe for one second that Dryden had done it. He lived far too vitally in his own histrionic world of make-believe to touch stark reality in the commission of murder. But why the hell had he chosen those same five minutes in which to feel ill and absent himself from the studio? For Leopold Dryden personally, Caird did not give two straws, though he had a genuine love of the theatre, and therefore could not contemplate with equanimity the hanging of the finest romantic actor of his day, however much a bore he might be personally. But there was Isabel to be thought of, and that was quite a different story. For Isabel, Caird cherished a long-standing and entirely sentimental affection; sentimental because based on an entirely conventional beginning. Caird had first seen her when he was an undergraduate, and she was the "baby" of a celebrated chorus at the Gaiety. He had gone to watch her across the footlights again and again, with a queer, half-ashamed devotion altogether inexplicable. He had met her only three years later, when she was already engaged to Leopold Dryden, and he had never got to know her particularly well. But the streak of romantic weakness for her persisted, and he always thought of her as hardly more than a child, very lovable and touchingly helpless. He had not meant to cast her in *The Scarlet Highwayman,* for Rodney Fleming, who knew the Dryden's well, had warned him that their domestic waters were not invariably smooth, and that

Leopold was inclined to indulge a weakness for making scenes either with, or in front of, his wife. But Dryden had made her engagement a condition of his own, and so it had been arranged. That she was in love with her husband, no one, however obtuse, could fail to see. And to Caird, the thought that she might have to face Leopold in the dock on a murder charge was grotesque and horrible. . . .

He looked at his watch. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. Caird had intended to do some work, but imagination and speculation had got the better of him, and it was obviously impossible to think of it at that time of night. And then suddenly an idea struck him. It was something the police surgeon had said—his assertion that Parsons had been strangled by someone wearing gloves. What had happened to those gloves? Had the murderer taken the risk of just slipping them into his pocket, when the crime might have been discovered at once and a general search instituted? Or had he got rid of them—hidden them somewhere? If so, where? It might be a ridiculous speculation, but had Spears appreciated the importance of those gloves? Had they been looked for specifically? As he considered the point, Caird became certain of one thing: that he could not go home to bed without making sure that those gloves were not tucked away somewhere in 7C or in its immediate surroundings. He would go up to the studio right away and see for himself.

He started. The building was very silent; the vast corridors were very dimly lighted. Broadcasting

House seemed to brood, sombre and immense, over its secret. On his way towards the studio tower, the shadowy form of a cat skulked past him and vanished—a shadow among the other shadows—making him jump and swear softly to himself. At the end of the passage he ran into the fireman making his rounds.

"You're very late, sir," said that worthy cheerfully. "I see that cat gave you a bit of a jump. Cunning little devils. There're still two of 'em we've never been able to get 'old of out of that lot that come to live 'ere when the place was building."

"Anyone left in the tower?" asked Caird.

"Empire announcer in 3A, sir. That's all. Were you going to the studio, sir? I'm afraid there are no lights in the tower above the third floor."

"Oh, that's all right," said Caird. "There's something I left in 7C this afternoon. Don't bother about the lights. I've got a box of matches."

The fireman groped in his capacious pockets.

"You'd better 'ave this electric torch, sir. I always carry a spare."

"That's very good of you," said Caird. "Thanks. Don't you find the building a bit gloomy late at night?"

The fireman laughed.

"Gloomy, sir? Nice and quiet, I calls it. Gives me opportunities to do a bit of thinkin'. I live up St. Pancras way, sir, and you don't get much quiet there, I can tell you. I'm not what they call a nervous type, sir."

"You evidently aren't," murmured Caird. "Thanks for your torch. I'll leave it for you at the reception desk in the morning. Good-night."

"Good-night to you, sir." And with a parting salute, the fireman passed through the swing doors and down the staircase beyond them, leading to the third floor.

Caird clicked the torch on and off to see that it was in working order, and then made his way into the studio tower. At that time of night the lifts were no longer working. Everything was dark, silent, and—to Caird, who knew the studio tower as a hive of continuous, almost feverish activity between half-past nine in the morning and half-past ten at night—disquietingly unnatural. He began to feel the impulse which was drawing him towards 7C to be due either to rank folly or to blatant neuroticism. But then he wondered whether the fact might not be that he was a little scared. That stiffened his lip and confirmed his decision, and with the torch throwing a patch of white light in front of him, he went up the three flights of the studio-tower staircase that lay between the fourth and seventh floors. Though he did not realize it at the time, he did a curious thing. He walked quite noiselessly on tiptoe, almost as though he knew subconsciously that the quarry waiting for him in the studio might be something considerably more exciting than a pair of gloves. . . .

At the top of the stairs he paused for a moment. Three steps to the left brought him to the swing doors leading to the passage that ran directly through the tower: the passage along which he had hurried the night before on his way from the panel room to 6A;

the passage whose farther end Higgins should have guarded. Apart from the doors at each end of it, its length was further divided by two heavy swing doors which, when shut, converted its central section into a triangular listening room, from which, through three glass panels, a studio manager could keep an eye on the happenings in 6A, 7B, and 7C almost simultaneously. But all these doors had circular glass panes let into their upper parts, so that it was possible to see from one end of the passage right down to the other. Now after what the fireman had told him, Caird had expected to be able to see nothing beyond the glass panel of the first door but blank darkness. What he did see was a light, not flickering, but moving steadily to and fro somewhere in the triangular listening room. He snapped out his own torch and stood still, watching and listening. He could hear nothing. There were two doors, practically soundproof, between him and the moving light, and apart from the light he could see nothing. But he knew it was very much his business to get so as to be able to see more; that it was almost inconceivable that two people should have had the same idea of poking about for clues in 7C in the small hours of the morning; and that any further investigation held the possibility of complicity, or even guilt, on the part of the investigator.

Caird put his torch into his pocket, very gingerly opened the double doors wide enough to slip through, and stole along the passage catlike, hugging the left-hand wall and hardly daring to breathe. Through the second door the light now glowed steadily, as if the unknown had found what he wanted and had settled down to examine it. And now Caird felt himself hot on the trail of the murderer, with the very stink of death in his nostrils, as he paused, quivering all over with excitement, his body braced against the door leading to studio 7C on his left—quite dark and undisturbed—6A listening room on his right; a few feet in front of him the second passage door, and behind it the mysterious light.

Without giving himself time to wonder too precisely how to act next—for he rather doubted his ability to face up to a purely physical emergency—he wrenched the door open and sprang forward. The light came from an electric torch standing on a fixed table let into the angle of the walls of 7B and 7C, and in its rays stood a man crouched up against a cupboard let into the wall of 6A. As Caird opened the door, there was a startled exclamation and a snap. The man jumped back, the cupboard door opened, and Caird found himself facing Stewart Evans breathing hard, with a chisel in one hand and a bunch of keys in the other!

CHAPTER XIII

. . . AND GETS NO CHANGE

"WHAT in God's name are you doing here, Evans, at this time of night?" demanded Caird, when he had recovered sufficiently from his amazement to find his voice. He had anticipated a good many possibilities, but they did not include Stewart Evans with all the appurtenances of an amateur cracksman.

Evans seemed considerably the cooler of the two. He slipped the bunch of keys back into his pocket and laid the chisel carefully on the table beside his electric torch before bothering to reply. When he spoke, it was in his usual affectedly insolent tone.

"Suppose I ask you the same question, Caird?"

With extreme difficulty Caird kept his temper.

"I don't propose to enter into a slanging match," he said. "Departmentally I am responsible for what you do inside this building. Programme research covers a wide field, I know, but I would be glad if you'd tell me what form of research covers breaking into cupboards in the small hours of the morning?"

"Well, of course, if you're going to drag in administrative red tape——" Evans began.

"I'm not dragging in anything," Caird persisted. "But you'll tell me, unless you'd prefer to explain to the controller in the morning."

Evans scowled.

"He might like to have the same sort of explanation from you, Caird. As a matter of fact, I haven't the least objection to telling you. Criminology happens to be a hobby of mine."

"Yes," said Caird, "you've told me that on several occasions. Well?"

"Well, you couldn't expect me not to take advantage of it when I find murder committed in the building where I actually work," said Evans. "It's a chance in a million. I always thought the police force in this country was an extremely overrated organization. They are neither practical, like the French, nor psychologically up-to-date, like the Austrians. They simply work by rule of thumb. I've seen evidence of that again and again. Now I'm taking the opportunity of proving it."

"What do you know about the case, anyway, Evans? It's no business of yours."

"As much mine as it is yours," retorted Evans. "Or are you pretending that you came up here to see if any more dead bodies of artists were lying about in your precious studios? Or to investigate whether rats and mice frequented them during the night? You may as well admit that you came up here tonight to do a bit of amateur detecting."

"Why I came up here is entirely my business," said Caird. "Owing to a set of most unfortunate circumstances, which I would most willingly have handed over to you, I found myself bang in the middle of this revolting business. I can't help knowing as much about it as anyone. But you had nothing to do with the broadcast of *The Scarlet Highwayman.*"

"No," said Evans. "You had the sense not to allot that sort of tripe to me to produce. But as I say, I'm *interested* in crime, and after I left last night I got hold of one of the police photographers. Efficient or not, he was certainly corruptible. It only cost me ten bob to get a very fair *résumé* of the police surgeon's report on the finding of the body."

"We'll leave that for the moment," said Caird. "What were you playing at with that cupboard?"

"It happens," said Evans, "to be Higgins's cupboard, in which he keeps his studio cleaning materials and odds and ends."

Julian Caird started.

"Higgins's cupboard? What's Higgins got to do with it?"

"Oh, I know they've been grilling Higgins," said Evans wearily. "And that he didn't turn up for duty today."

Mentally Caird cursed Bannister's cheerful garrulity.

"I thought it would be worth looking into—the cupboard, I mean," Evans went on. "I've noticed that as a rule he leaves the door just ajar. And today I spotted that it was shut—locked. It's self-locking. Don't bother to ask me how I know all that. I happen to be naturally rather observant."

Caird bit his lip.

"But what did you expect to find in the cupboard?"

"If you must know—a pair of gloves."

"A pair of gloves?" stammered Caird. "Look here, Evans, are you trying to pin this thing onto that poor devil Higgins?"

"Higgins? Ridiculous!" said Evans contemptuously. "He's hardly got the strength to clean out a studio, let alone strangle a man. Besides, if Higgins had done it, I shouldn't be looking for the gloves in his cupboard. Unless he were insane, it would be psychologically impossible for him to have put them there. Yes, and don't bother to quote that at me about every murderer's one mistake, will you?"

"I wish you'd try to be civil for two minutes, Evans. It won't get us anywhere to spit and snarl at each other like a couple of cats on a wall! After all, we both want to get to the bottom of the thing, if we can. Though I don't share your views with regard to the police, we know more about the inside of Broadcasting House than they do. We *might* be helpful. What made you think of the cupboard in the first instance? And whose gloves do you expect to find inside it, if they don't belong to Higgins?"

"I'm sorry," said Evans ungraciously. "I suppose I'm not very matey or bonhomous," and the scorn with which he emphasized the epithets made Caird smile. "I thought of the cupboard because, as I told you, its door is nearly always ajar. That's probably because Higgins is lazy and is in the habit of forgetting his keys. Well, I learned by means of my bribery and corruption that the strangling is supposed to have been done by a man with gloves on. Now, the man who planned this crime and carried it out must have been fairly strong, very quick, and very intelligent. He certainly wouldn't have been such a fool as to keep the gloves in his possession a second longer than was necessary. He wouldn't leave them in the studio, because every inch of it would be bound to be searched. He could leave 7C by two doors: either through the door which leads into 7B, or by the ordinary door into the passage. I thought the latter. The door into 7B is solid; the one into the passage has a circular glass panel in it, and he could be sure that the coast was clear. He had obviously reconnoitred the ground very carefully. In that case he must have known that, on leaving 7C by the door into the passage, he had only to push open the swing door into the triangular listening room with his left hand for the open door of that cupboard to be within arm's length. To dump the gloves inside and slam the door might add five seconds to his time, not more. It would be worth it."

Caird nodded. In spite of his personal antipathy to Evans, he had to recognize that the reasoning was cogent, clear, and sensible.

"He could reasonably hope to count," Evans continued, "on Higgins being the first to reopen the cupboard. He wouldn't be looking for gloves, would he? He'd probably do the obvious thing, on finding a pair of expensive gloves in the cupboard. He'd take them to a pawnshop. Then either they would be forgotten among the usual jetsam of those establishments, or else—if the police are as efficient as they make out—Scotland Yard might have got to know of them, and

Higgins would have been for the high jump. In either case, the murderer's on velvet."

"All right," said Caird. "You've almost convinced me. But the point is, are the gloves there?"

He turned to the cupboard, but before he could look inside, Evans had snatched up the torch, pushed past him, and flashed its rays along the shelves. There was an accumulation of dust; some brushes; a pile of newspapers, and a collection of dusters. And for a moment Caird thought he would have the supreme satisfaction of seing Evans's theory falsified to his face. But at that moment Evans uttered a little cry of satisfaction, scrabbled behind the newspapers, and dragged out a pair of brown leather gloves.

"There you are!" he said.

"Good for you!" said Caird, trying his best to make his voice sound cordial. "The next thing is, whose are they?" But his heart sank as he spoke, for he knew very well the owner of those expensive gloves of dark brown leather. They were unusually small for a man's gloves. They had scalloped gauntlet wrists, and a good deal of rather exotic black stitchings on their backs. And unfortunately it was impossible that more than one man in London could wear gloves like that. But it was possible that Evans might not know who that man was. . . .

"That question's easily answered," sneered Evans. "I should have thought *you* would know, at any rate, with your wide circle of theatrical friends. They're Leopold Dryden's gloves. Affected, extravagant idiot!

Fancy having things like that made for you!" And he flipped the gloves with his fingers.

"A man can be affected and extravagant without committing murder," said Caird. "Are you seriously trying to make me believe that you suspect Leopold Dryden?"

"Suspect him? It's as plain as a pikestaff. He's got just the sort of limited intelligence combined with colossal vanity that all the showy murderers have. Look at Mahon. I shan't shed any tears for him. Rude, domineering brute! He couldn't even be civil to a guest in his own house."

"Oh, rot!" said Caird angrily. "Leo's got his faults, like most actors. He *is* rather vain, and he's liable to be temperamental and difficult. But he's quite a good chap, if you take him the right way."

"I'm afraid we've got different standards, Caird. I don't call a man a 'good chap' when he makes scenes with his wife in front of her friends—humiliates her and makes them feel uncomfortable. A man who behaves like that is a cad, I don't care how good an actor he is!"

"Well, don't finger those gloves more than you can help," interrupted Caird sharply. "I'm seeing Spears tomorrow, and I'll hand them over to him. But I never knew you were a friend of—Isabel's."

"You're not omniscient, Caird. I've known her for some time. I think I can say that I know her considerably better than you do."

"Well, we needn't argue about that. If you're a friend of hers also, I don't imagine you want to do anything to cause her unnecessary pain. Look here, we've obviously got to hand these gloves over to the police, but I don't see why we should tell them that we know they belong to Leopold Dryden."

Evans put his hand down on the gloves. Leaning forward a little, and with his lips curling so that his teeth were partly bared, he gave the impression of an animal crouching to bite.

"Don't take too much upon yourself, Caird," he said fiercely. "I know what I'm doing, and it doesn't come within the scope of your department. I'll take these gloves to the police myself, and I'll tell them what I like! As for giving Isabel pain, it would be the best thing that had ever happened to her in all her life if Leopold Dryden were hanged as high as Haman! I only hope to God he is!"

He thrust the gloves into his pocket, snatched up his torch, pushed open the other swing door of the triangular listening room savagely, and disappeared, leaving Caird alone in the darkness listening until his footsteps died away along the passage.

CHAPTER XIV

SPEARS *VERSUS* CAIRD

TO JULIAN CAIRD, in spite of his familiarity with the detectives and the police work of fiction, Scotland Yard had retained its conventionally sinister reputation. When he entered its portals the morning after his midnight encounter with Stewart Evans, he expected to be plunged into an atmosphere compounded of hard-faced gaolers with bunches of keys jangling at their belts, echoing stone corridors, and dungeons with windows heavily barred. Accordingly Inspector Spears's office, with its comfortable furniture and thick carpet, its wide open windows giving upon the Embankment and the river, and its owner's air of pleasant informality, came as a considerable surprise. But after Spears had shaken hands warmly with his visitor, offered him a cigarette, and put him into an almost luxurious armchair, he showed very quickly that he was not going to waste time in coming to the point of the interview. He sat at his desk with a newly sharpened pencil in his hands and a pad of pale green paper before him, looked Caird very straight in the eyes, coughed twice, and plunged into his questioning.

"Mr. Caird," he began, "I'm going to be as frank with you as I can. This is about as difficult and complicated a case as I've ever had to handle. I won't deny that personally it means a good deal to me. With an organization like the B.B.C. involved, the whole country has got its eyes on the affair. The press are in full cry, and I've been before the commissioner once already, which looks as if he was being pressed for information by the Cabinet. As you'll easily understand, my main difficulty is that I know next to nothing about the inside of that box of tricks of yours, and I have asked you to come here—just as I've asked one or two other people who are involved—because I am bound to be dependent upon you for a good deal of necessary technical information. I don't imagine for one moment that you will try to mislead me, but I want to emphasize that I should like you to answer my questions with the greatest possible care and with the full realization that if you make mistakes I may be put off the scent altogether."

"Yes, I see that," said Caird uneasily. "I'll do my best."

"Thanks. I'm sure you will. Well, then, first of all, would you mind telling me, as shortly as you can and so simply that a layman like myself can follow you, how you handle a broadcast play; and especially how you handled *this* broadcast play—explain all that business about the dramatic control panel and a whole lot of studios—why it is a producer sits two floors away from the studios in which his cast are performing, and why the whole cast doesn't perform in the same studio."

Caird got out of his chair and stubbed out his cigarette.

"If you don't mind, I'll prowl up and down a bit," he said. "I can think better on my feet."

"As you like," said Spears, smiling.

"Well," said Caird, "the chief reasons why we use several studios, and not one, are two. The first is that by the use of separate studios the producer can get different acoustic effects for his scenes. That is to say, in a small studio like 7C, which is built so as to exclude all echo, you get the effect of a closed room or a dungeon—as in the scene where Parsons was killed. Whereas in a fairly large studio like 6A, you can get the effect of greater spaciousness—as in the scene previous to the murder scene in *The Scarlet Highwayman,* a ballroom. Secondly, the modern radio play depends for its 'continuity'—if you understand the film analogy—upon the ability to 'fade' one scene at its conclusion into the next. You can see at once that there must be at least two studios in use for these 'fades' to be possible. In an elaborate play, therefore, the actors require as many studios as the varying acoustics of the different scenes require, while, in order to avoid their being confused by music or extraneous noises, sound effects have a studio of their own, gramophone effects one more, and the orchestra providing the incidental music yet another separate one."

He paused. Spears was making notes rapidly upon his writing pad.

"Yes, I follow so far," he said. "Your Mr. Macdonald gave me the studio requisition sheet for *The Scarlet Highwayman.* What's this studio allotted to 'Echo 8A'?"

DRAMA DEPARTMENT.

D.C. PANEL No. 1. GROUPING

2	4	11	7	9
	Echo 8A		6D	6E

ECHO

1	3	5	Group Control	6	8	10
	7C	8A		6A	6B	6C

OPERATED BY Mr. HANCOCK (Dramatic Balance and Control)

FROM:

Stage Manager

TO:

E.I.C. (Control Room)
Balance & Control
Announcers' Executive
House Superintendent
Programme Routine

BBC/P/285

Transmission {Nat. June 30th, 193- Time 8.0 - 8.55
{Reg. June 29th, 193- " 9.20 - 10.15

Title "THE SCARLET HIGHWAYMAN"

Producer Mr. CAIRD

REHEARSALS

June 21st) 2.30 - 5.00 (Any single studio)
" 22nd)

" 23rd) All studios) 10.30 - 1.30
" 24th) except 8A)
" 25th)
" 26th)

June 28th 10.30 - 1.30
" 29th 2.00 - 5.00

STUDIO ALLOCATION

8A	Theatre Orchestra	6B)	Subsidiary cast studios.
6D	Effects	6C)	
6E	Gramophone effects	7C)	
6A	Main Cast studio		

NOTES

"An echo room," said Caird, "is simply a room built so that sounds made in it shall echo as much as possible. This echo can be added to the output of any studio when the producer so desires in order even more drastically to change its normal acoustic background. It is used very frequently in varying degrees for musical transmissions of all kinds, as well as to produce peculiar results in plays. The output of an ordinary studio is passed into the echo room, collects the artificial echo from there, and is picked up by a second microphone in the echo room and continues on its way towards transmission with the artificial echo attached. Is that clear?"

"More or less," said Spears. "You know, Caird, if you and your people had lived in the Middle Ages, you'd have been burned for witchcraft!"

"Many thanks for dropping the 'Mr.' at last," said Caird.

"Well," said Spears whimsically, "I expect we'll be seeing a good deal of each other in the immediate future. Go on about this dramatic control panel of yours."

"It looks a good deal more complicated than it really is," said Caird. "You see, as I've explained, a radio play is made up of a mixture of various ingredients—actors, effects, and music. If a producer is to get a proper grasp of the perspective of the whole, he wants to be remote from all those studios. That's why the producer sits tucked away in the dramatic control-panel room, and that's why he has someone like Ian Macdonald to look after his actors, to see that they keep their heads and preserve studio discipline."

"Yes, I see. Go on."

"All right. The panel itself is simply a switchboard, on which vulcanite knobs connected with the studios enable the output of each studio to be controlled in strength, and mixed. The reasons for controlling the strength are obvious, and this controlling enables the 'fades,' which I referred to before, to be carried out as the action moves from one studio to another. By means of the mixing, the sound effects and the musical background are kept at their proper strength when they are used simultaneously with the output of the actors in their studios."

"I'm getting there slowly," said Spears. "So your producer parcels out the ingredients of his play among the studios, and then controls them by twisting the vulcanite knobs of the dramatic control panel?"

"Exactly. Except that *I* don't happen to have a mechanical mind. I can't even drive a car with any degree of satisfaction to myself or safety to anybody else, so when I am producing I have a specially trained balance-and-control engineer—in this case, Desmond Hancock—to do the actual knob-twisting under my direction. Whether he twists his own knobs or not, is left to the discretion of the individual producer. Of course," Caird went on, "there are also on the panel light switches connected with a green bulb in each studio, by means of which the producer, or his assistant on the panel, gives their cues to begin or finish a scene to his actors, effects men, and so forth. And opposite the panel is a loud speaker, as you saw, through which the whole play, as it is woven together by means of his direction from the panel, comes to the producer's ears."

"What about these *return* lights you were talking about?" asked Spears. "The lights that failed and sent you down into Studio—6A, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes," said Caird. "Sorry. I forgot that. That's an extra gadget we had put in after the move from Savoy Hill. It's often useful, particularly if the producer can't read a musical score, for a conductor or a studio manager to be able to send a light signal back to the producer from his studio. There's a row of these lights, each marked with the number of the studio from which it comes, on the wall of the panel room."

"Well, what about this failing?"

"I expected a return light from the orchestral conductor in 8A just before the end of the ballroom scene which preceded the scene of the murder. As a matter of fact, it was only a precautionary measure, for I knew where we were in the scene perfectly well. But a little later in the play there was a very urgent case for Macdonald to give me a return light from 6A. Now I didn't get the light from 8A, and there have been cases when light circuits have gone wrong."

"Hardly surprising," murmured Spears. "How many thousand miles of wire have you got in that precious building of yours?"

"Heaven knows!" grinned Caird. "But several thousand, I believe. Well, as you can imagine, one gets pretty worked up during these transmissions. I know I'm always as nervous as a cat."

"Had you any reason," interrupted Spears, "to be specially nervous about this play?"

Caird, who had been walking up and down, stopped and looked at the detective in astonishment, for this question had come at him like a bullet.

"No, I don't think so," he said at last. "Except that it was about as complicated as one of these plays can be from the technical point of view. I think Rodney Fleming had done his best to put me on my mettle. He put every trick and gadget he could think of into the script. In fact, he told me that he wanted to see if I could justify my boast that I could do anything with the panel and my own little nest of studios. Of course, rehearsals hadn't been too easy, but then they seldom are when you've got a star actor—especially when he's a temperamental lunatic like Leo Dryden. Of course," he added hastily, "Leo hasn't been a bit well for the last ten days. Not a bit like himself." He stopped abruptly, wondering whether he had only succeeded in making bad worse.

"All right," said Spears. "Let's get back to the light that failed. You were saying that you found these shows nervous work."

"Yes. I was only trying to explain to you why, when I didn't get that return light from 8A, I did what must seem to you a pretty wild thing. But I was so afraid that the whole circuit for the return lights might have gone wrong; and if it had, it was essential that Macdonald should know, or there might have been an appalling mess later on."

"Why did you go down yourself?"

"I had to. Hancock couldn't leave his knobs, and the engineer on duty was simply there in case of a mechanical breakdown and had to inform the main control-room engineer-in-chief—he didn't know enough about the play to be able to explain to Macdonald. There was no one else in the room. Besides, I knew there was the Parsons soliloquy and murder scene to follow, which I could safely leave to Hancock; and I expected to be back in the panel room in time for the scene which followed the murder."

"That's clear enough," said Spears. "Now how exactly did you go down? And how long did it take you?"

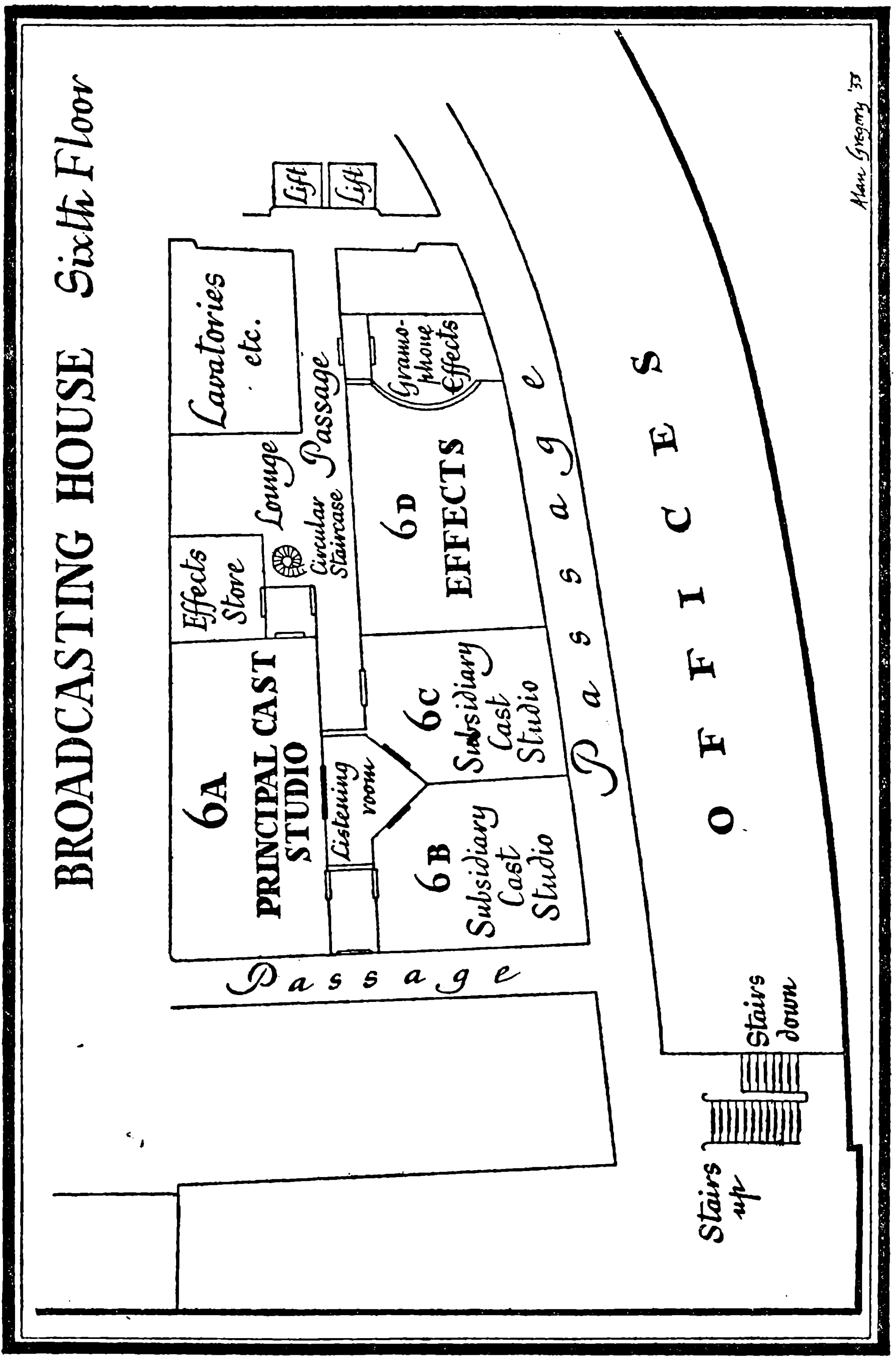
"Well, under five minutes, I should think, all told. I went down the staircase from the D.C. panel room to the seventh floor, then along the passage which leads into the tower, and down the control corridor with 7B and 7C on my right and the upper part of 6A on my left. You remember 6A, owing to its height, covers two floors?"

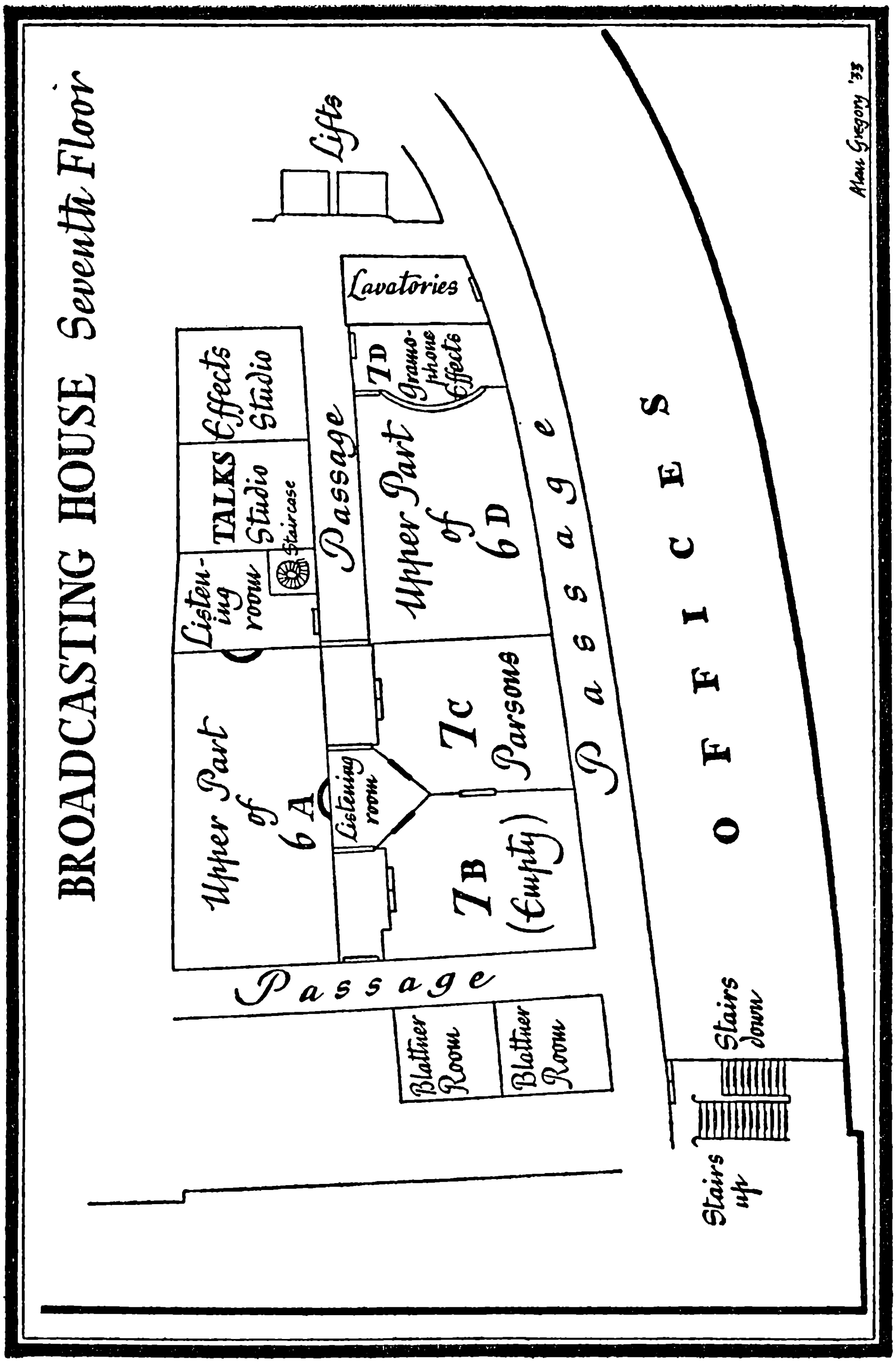
"Quite. Go on."

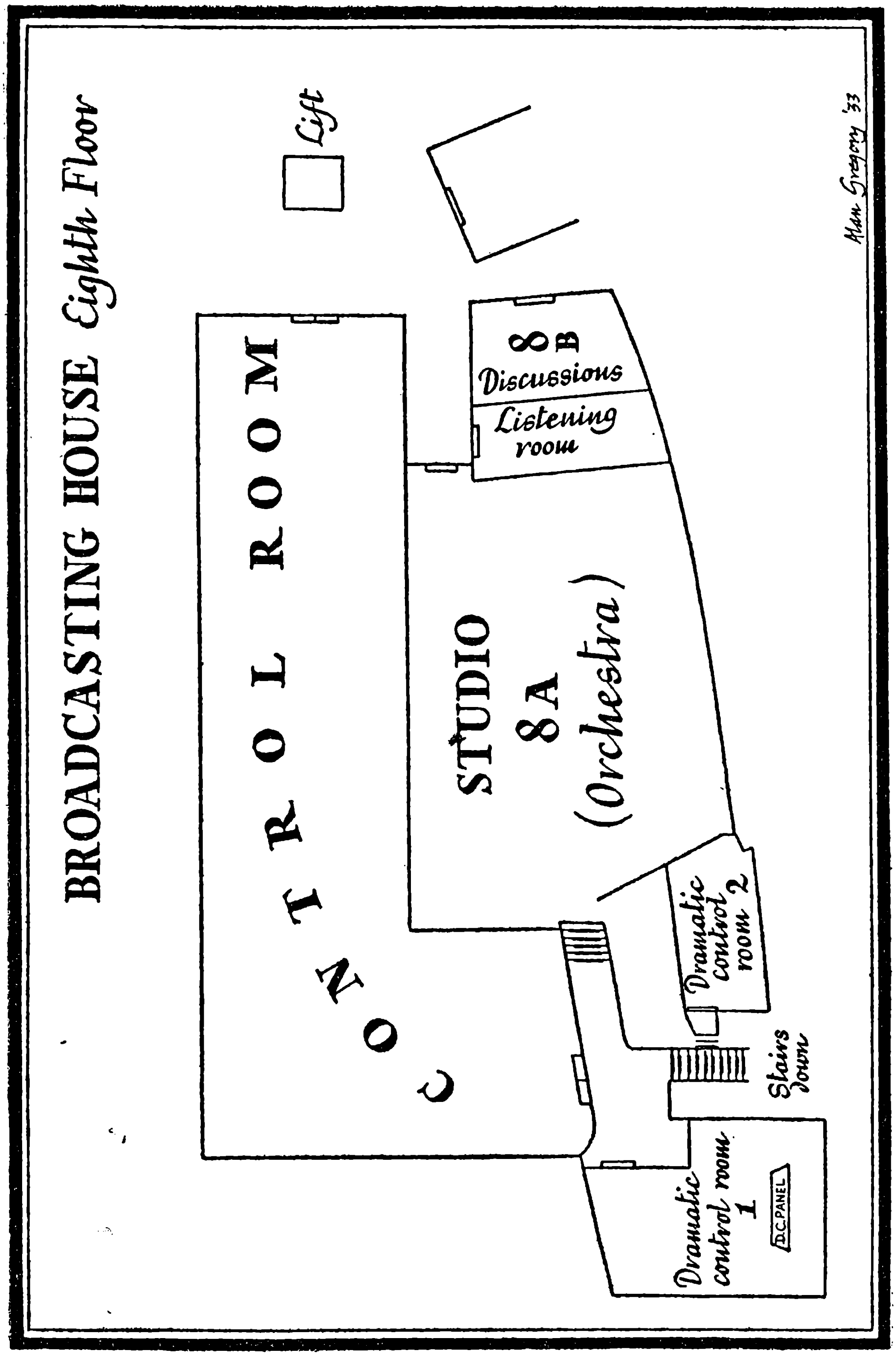
"First of all I noticed that Higgins wasn't on guard outside the door leading into the tower on the seventh floor, as he should have been. But I think I only noticed that subconsciously. It didn't strike me at the time."

"You didn't look into 7C?"

"Obviously not. I was in a hurry, and I didn't want to put Parsons off. I bolted straight down the tiny spiral staircase from the seventh floor to the sixth."


BROADCASTING HOUSE Sixth Floor
Lavatories etc.
Lift
Lift
Passage
Lounge
Circular Staircase
Effects Store
6A PRINCIPAL CAST STUDIO
Listening room
6B Subsidiary Cast Studio
6C Subsidiary Cast Studio
6D EFFECTS
Gramo-phone Effects
Passage
Passage
OFFICES
Stairs up
Stairs down
Alan Gregory '33


BROADCASTING HOUSE Seventh Floor
Lifts
Lavatories
Effects Studio
TALKS Studio
Staircase
Listening room
Passage
7D Gramophone Effects
Upper Part of 6D
Upper Part of 6A
Listening room
7C Parsons
7B (Empty)
Passage
Passage
Blattner Room
Blattner Room
OFFICES
Stairs down
Stairs up
Alan Gregory '33


BROADCASTING HOUSE *Eighth Floor*
Lift
CONTROL ROOM
8 B
Discussions
Listening room
STUDIO 8A
(Orchestra)
Dramatic control room 2
Stairs down
Dramatic control room 1
D.C. PANEL
Alan Gregory '33

"Yes, I've got the plans of those floors here," said Spears. "Coming down that passage from north to south as you were, it's on your left immediately beyond the 6A listening room. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, what happened when you got down into 6A?"

"Just as I got into the studio, the white light, which means a telephone call from the control room for whoever's on duty in the studio, went on. I hurried out, answered it, and was informed by the engineer at the other end that the return-light circuit was working and it had simply been a mistake on the part of the conductor in 8A."

"So even the B.B.C. makes mistakes!" said Spears.

"Now and then," agreed Caird airily. "Just to prove its essential humanity, you know."

"And you went back to the panel room feeling better?"

"Between shock and reaction, I was sweating like a pig," Caird confessed.

"Did you go back the same way?"

"I did."

"And did you notice anything out of the usual?"

"I suppose so."

Spears looked up sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," said Caird desperately, "I don't want to lead you to draw any false conclusions——"

"I'll take care of that, Caird. What happened?"

"Well, just at the top of the spiral staircase, I saw

Leo Dryden coming along the seventh-floor passage through the centre of the tower from the direction of the lifts."

"And I suppose he had no business to be there?"

"I didn't notice that he wasn't in 6A amongst all the others," said Caird reluctantly.

"Did you speak to him?"

"Yes. I asked him what the devil he was doing out of the studio. He said he had felt ill and gone outside the tower for a breath of fresh air. Of course you know that all the air inside the studio tower is pumped through an elaborate ventilating system? People who haven't broadcast in a play before occasionally find the atmosphere rather trying."

"Never mind about that," said Spears. *"Was* he ill?"

"He looked ghastly; very much as he did when you saw him later that night. Macdonald confirms that Dryden had got leave from him to go out of the studio for a minute or two."

Spears looked carefully at his plans of the various floors spread out on his desk.

"That's all very well, but couldn't he have got fresh air on the sixth floor? Why should he have gone up to the seventh?"

Caird shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't possibly answer that," he said.

"No. Perhaps Mr. Dryden had better answer that question himself. Anything else?"

"One thing. I thought that Rodney Fleming, who as you know was in the 6A listening room, might have noticed me rush down and have got nervous about some disaster happening to his beloved play, so I put my head into the listening room, after hunting Dryden down the spiral staircase, to reassure him."

"Was he duly reassured?"

Caird smiled.

"It was typical of Rodney that he didn't need to be reassured. He hadn't noticed me go. He'd been telephoning. His call must have come through just before I went down, and he was still telephoning when I put my head into the listening room. So I left him to it and went back to the panel room."

There was a pause, broken only by the scratching of Spears's pencil.

"Yes, I've got a pretty good idea of it now," he said quietly, almost to himself. "When you got back the murder scene was over?"

"Yes. Desmond Hancock was grinning like a Cheshire cat because it had gone so well. I don't think there's anything more to tell you. The play finished on time, and it was on our way down to the studios that Hancock looked into 7C and discovered the body."

"Thanks very much, Caird. All this is most helpful. I suppose you didn't meet anyone else—someone, for example, quite unconnected with the play—between your meeting with Dryden, your look in upon Fleming, and your return to the D.C. room? There was no one else in the passage?"

"Higgins would have been," said Caird. "Only he had deserted his post. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," said Spears. "I just wondered. Good-bye."

He bent over his notes.

Caird realized that the interview was over and took his departure. It was only as he emerged into Whitehall that the significance of the detective's final question struck him—that he had been asked for evidence to confirm his own story that he had gone straight back to the D.C. room after looking in upon Fleming in the 6A listening room; that he was on the list of possible suspects. . . .

The sun was hot overhead, but he felt a chilly sensation at the base of his spine. For, being essentially fair-minded, he had to admit that it *would* have been just possible for him to turn from the door of the 6A listening room through the door of 7C, and to catch Parsons at the close of his speech. With that realization, his collar felt uncomfortably tight about his neck.

He would probably have been relieved had he only known that at the same moment Rodney Fleming in his turn was entering Spears's office to have *his* answers recorded on another page of that same pad of pale green paper.

CHAPTER XV

SPEARS *VERSUS* FLEMING

THERE was no trace of the proverbial diffidence or shyness about Rodney Fleming's entrance into the office of Inspector Spears. But then Fleming, for his years, was a sophisticated person, who did not share Caird's illusions about the impressiveness of Police Headquarters.

"Jolly place you've got here, Inspector," were his first words. "I like your view. But can't you bribe the English Fascists to burn down the County Hall, on the same principle as someone burned the Reichstag? Don't pay any attention to this chatter of mine. I'm always professionally bright in the morning. May I smoke?"

"By all means," said Spears. "But I'm afraid I don't keep Egyptian cigarettes. Have the armchair."

Fleming sat down.

"So you've observed that I don't smoke gaspers, my dear Holmes. You restore my faith in the police. Now complete the cure, Inspector. Bring out your handcuffs."

"What do you mean, Mr. Fleming?"

Rodney Fleming smiled; and when he smiled, his face became really attractive.

"Well, I can't expect to get out of Scotland Yard without gyves upon my wrist, can I? After all, look at me—promising young playwright, *vide* daily press. That's almost enough to hang a man by itself, when you think of the company it puts me into automatically. I've been referred to as a second Noel Coward. I have no visible means of support, except one successful play, now off; one play broadcast, in which one of the actors dies a violent death; a second play bought for production by Leopold Dryden; various journalistic efforts and a number of stories. Apart from that, what do you know about me, except that I was on the scene of the crime and most uncomfortably close to where it was committed? My dear Inspector, if you don't arrest me, I shall have to think very seriously about having another Question asked in the House about the Police. And you know what the House feels about *that* subject!"

"I like your little jokes, Mr. Fleming," said Spears, glancing at his wrist watch, "and if you don't mind my saying so, I thoroughly enjoyed your first play. But it is because I don't know very much about you that I asked you to come and see me this morning. You'll answer a few questions, I imagine?"

"Delighted, Inspector. Turn on your third degree. What do I get—rubber truncheons, fire hose, or simply solitary confinement and no sleep?"

"I'll tell you when you start refusing to answer," said Spears.

"Well, suppose I start with a few biographical details. The second son of my mother, and she a widow. My father an undistinguished civil servant, some years deceased. We lived on his pension. Showed some mental agility as a small boy, and got scholarships at Oundle and Clare—Cambridge, you know."

"Oh, I know," said Spears. "I was at Oxford myself. Not the university, but Magdalen College School."

"I beg your pardon, Inspector. That was not polite of me. Intended for chartered accountancy. Disliked the notion heartily when I came close up against it, and drifted onto the stage. All the symptoms of going to the dogs, you see. Scraped a living in the provinces for a few years, with occasional bursts of understudying and walking-on in London. I lived with Julian Caird on one of those tours, and we became friends—that's how we got to know each other."

"Quite so," nodded Spears.

"But then I wrote that play you said you saw. I was lucky with it. It's a damned bad bit of work, but it caught on. I'm afraid the reason was because I managed to get an expression not usually employed in drawing rooms past the censor. You'll forgive my modesty in not agreeing with your opinion of its merits, Inspector!"

"Just as you say, Mr. Fleming. Now would you mind giving me your reason for writing this play for broadcasting—*The Scarlet Highwayman?*"

Fleming sat up in the chair and became serious.

"I had several reasons," he said. "The first was frankly commercial. Most authors are not intelligent enough to see it, but there is no advertisement in the world like having your work broadcast. Now, as I told you, Leopold Dryden has accepted my second play. He means to do it this autumn—that is, of course, if you don't hang him instead! Sorry. That's not in very good taste. However, that was the idea. It struck me that if I could write him a lush part in a radio play, and get Julian to accept the play plus Dryden as a proposition, I should get an admirable 'trailer,' as it were, for my production in the autumn."

"I see."

"Secondly, I wanted a holiday, and the fee for *The Scarlet Highwayman* would just about pay for one rather nicely. And lastly, I wanted to show Julian Caird that in spite of his infernal technicalities, I could, simply by listening rather carefully to several plays, write him a perfectly good one at my first shot. I did about three months' intensive listening. I came to the conclusion that if I couldn't write better stuff than that, I'd better shoot myself. Then I got him to let me watch him rehearsing a couple of plays at Broadcasting House. And then I went away for a fortnight and wrote *The Scarlet Highwayman.*"

"Please go on, Mr. Fleming."

"Julian accepted it. He couldn't very well do anything else, because, false modesty aside and conventional period stuff though the piece is, it's really not half bad, and I'd written it in such a way that it was practically a straightforward challenge to Julian's ingenuity as a producer. He was bound to take it or let me laugh at him, and you've probably noticed that he doesn't like being laughed at."

"I see you corroborate each other perfectly," said Spears, turning over his notes.

"Not too perfectly, I hope. That would be horribly suspicious. Whoever did it, Inspector, we didn't do it together. I decline to share a gallows tree with Julian Caird. I found it hard enough to share rooms with him."

Spears tapped his desk with his pencil a little impatiently.

"Suppose we go on to the actual night of the crime," said he. "Was it your suggestion, or Mr. Caird's, that you should listen to the play in the building rather than on a set outside?"

"Oh, mine," said Fleming. "It wasn't so much that I wanted to hear the play as that I wanted to see such scenes as I could being done by the cast in 6A."

"It was to see those scenes," persisted Spears, "that you sat in the 6A listening room and not in the D.C. panel room?"

Rodney Fleming looked a little surprised.

"Certainly."

"Was that the only reason?"

"Not quite. I expect Caird told you that I asked him if I could sit somewhere where I could have a telephone call put through to me without disturbing anyone else?"

"I remember something about it. Do you object to giving me some more details about that call?"

"Not in the least. It was a call from my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Yes. He's doing business manager for the tour of that first play of mine. It's on its second week in the provinces, at the Imperial Theatre, Leeds. We've had a certain amount of bother over the part of the father-in-law—you remember it? The actor playing it on tour is quite the wrong type, and at the end of the first week, George—my brother—wrote to me that the part would have to some extent to be rewritten to suit this man's type. Well, I didn't much care. I'm sick of the play, anyway. It's dead bones, as far as I'm concerned. I told George to go ahead and alter the part as he liked, only I wanted to talk it over with him finally once, before the rewritten part was actually staged. He said that he would have the job done by the night before last, and ring me up from the theatre. So I let him know the times between which I would be at the B.B.C."

"And the call came through—when?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you the exact time. You might get it from the B.B.C. private exchange."

"Ah, yes," said Spears, making a note.

"But I can tell you this," Fleming went on. "The telephone rang just as the ballroom scene before the murder scene was finishing. I remember being amused at Ian Macdonald quieting the chatter in 6A by waving his arms up and down like a more than usually demented conductor. It struck me that the listening audience would have had a good laugh if they could have seen that crowd, which I had carefully defined in my dialogue as 'powdered and bewigged, in brocades and satins, with snuffboxes and small-swords' moving to and from a suspended microphone slung on a wire, and wearing the most ordinary lounge suits and summer frocks. Dryden, of course, was in evening dress, jewelled studs and all——"

"Yes, I can imagine all that," Spears interrupted. "How long did your call last?"

"Again, I can't tell you exactly. The next thing I noticed was Julian poking his head round the door and saying something about a return light failing and he hoped I hadn't been worried. As a matter of fact, I hadn't noticed that anything had gone wrong, and I didn't pay much attention to him, except to wonder mildly why he was not up on his blasted knobs, because George was still on the telephone. I suppose we finished about two minutes after that."

"In fact you had two lots of three minutes? Or three?"

Fleming made an indeterminate gesture with his cigarette and blew smoke through his nostrils.

"I expect that's important," he said. "Times always are in murder mysteries, but as I don't want to put you wrong, I must refer you again to the exchange."

"You didn't see anyone except Mr. Caird pass the door of your listening room?"

"I didn't; but that proves nothing. I don't suppose I looked at the door until Julian came in and I turned round."

"And you saw nothing of Mr. Dryden during the play?"

"Dryden? I believe I did see him through the glass panel speaking to Macdonald and leaving the studio.

But he didn't come anywhere near me. I thought he was going out for the obvious reason."

"Tell me this, Mr. Fleming. Did Leopold Dryden impress you as being quite normal that evening?"

"Is what I think evidence, Inspector?" smiled Fleming. "Don't look annoyed—I'm only pulling your leg. I thought Dryden looked ill. He looked that when he arrived. But apart from that, he was much his usual tiresome temperamental self. Ill or not, he gave a first-rate performance. That I'll swear to in any court you like."

"Macdonald confirms that he was back in 6A for the beginning of his next scene," murmured Spears, almost to himself. "Do you agree?"

Fleming shrugged his shoulders.

"That scene had started before I finished my telephoning. He was in the studio when I looked through the glass again."

"Thank you. One more thing, Mr. Fleming. I believe Mr. Caird said that it was on your suggestion that he engaged Sidney Parsons for a part in your play. Was he a friend of yours? How did you come to know him?"

Again Fleming shrugged his shoulders.

"You know how one picks up acquaintances on the stage, Inspector. As a matter of fact, Parsons understudied in my first play, and I got to know him then. He wrote to me afterwards, saying that he was very hard up, and could I do anything for him. There was nothing suitable for him in the new play I had sold to Dryden, but I thought that he'd do for the gaoler in

The Scarlet Highwayman, and I suggested him casually to Caird. That's all."

"Then there's nothing else you can tell me that might throw any light on the affair?"

"I'm afraid not," said Fleming, getting up. "I'd like to help you, and if you've got room for a would-be helpful amateur in any sleuthing you may do, I'd like enormously to be in on it. Not sheer altruism, you know. The promising young author hunting for copy."

"I'll remember," said Spears gravely.

"Thanks ever so much. Nothing more you'd like to ask me? You're not thinking seriously that Dryden did it, are you, Inspector? You can take it from me that he didn't."

"Any particular reason for your certainty?"

"Instinct of the born psychologist," said Fleming airily. "Well, I suppose you won't tell me whom you *are* going to arrest, if it isn't me, and as usual I'm talking too much. Let me know if you want me again. Good-bye, Inspector. And I really do like your room." And with a comprehensive glance all round it, and another charming smile, Rodney Fleming lighted a fresh cigarette and departed, leaving behind him a smell of expensive Egyptian tobacco and a considerable increase in the pile of Inspector Spears's notes.

CHAPTER XVI

BANNISTER ON THE TRAIL

IT HAPPENED that this same morning which witnessed the examination at Scotland Yard by Inspector Spears of Caird, Fleming, and—as will shortly appear—Stewart Evans, marked also the beginning of a week's holiday for Bannister. The head of the effects section lived a curious, irregular existence, owing to the rather peculiar conditions of his work; which necessitated, among other things, that he should take his holidays less when he wanted them than when the exigencies of broadcast play production permitted. That is to say that whenever a rare week in Julian Caird's schedule made its appearance not including a play which required much activity on the part of the staff of the famous effects studio, Bannister snatched the opportunity to take a week's leave. One of Caird's difficulties was to persuade Bannister ever to take a holiday at all. For the latter was seldom really happy away from his gadgets and had been discovered on more than one occasion paying unofficial visits to the effects studio for experimental purposes when he was supposed to be away enjoying himself. He lived alone in a studio flat in Hampstead, had no hobby apart from his work and apparently no friends outside London. So as usual he had absolutely no idea what to do with his leave and had, in fact, made no plans of any kind till the death of Sidney Parsons gave a completely new twist to his thoughts.

For, as he had said, both to Spears and to Caird, Bannister had ideas about the tragedy. Like Stewart Evans, he had no great confidence in the official police, though for quite a different reason. To Evans any constituted body was, *ipso facto,* suspect. To Bannister it simply seemed improbable that a Scotland Yard detective could grasp details of the inside working of Broadcasting House sufficiently clearly within a short time to be able to solve a murder whose personalities and geography were so inseparably connected with the methods and ingredients of broadcast play production. It was not unreasonable that he should have thought after this fashion, for, of all the programme branch, Guy Bannister was most nearly connected with that aspect of broadcasting which seems so mysterious to the layman. He spent hours in explaining the whys and wherefores of the contents of the effects studio to interested visitors. He gave continual demonstrations of what can be done with thunder sheets and wind machines, with cylinders of compressed air, with tables with specially prepared surfaces, with electric resistances. But he was only too miserably aware of the extreme lack of comprehension shown by most of the same visitors in the face of all his efforts. In short, he believed that Spears neither knew the background against which the crime had been committed nor appreciated the importance of such knowledge. Further, like Caird and various cabinet ministers, he read a good deal of detective fiction. The death of Sidney Parsons had contained so many of the sensational elements common to the creations of the writers of sensational fiction that Bannister could not help looking for the inevitable, and inevitably successful, amateur detective indispensable in all such cases. Caird certainly did not fill the bill. He was much too nervous and worried about the whole thing. Rodney Fleming was not sufficiently interested as far as he could see, except from the point of view of obtaining possible "copy." And Dryden was both an actor and under considerable suspicion. Though he kept the idea very much to himself, and in the background of his mind at that, Guy Bannister began to wonder whether he might not do something about it. After all, he did know the background, and he wasn't altogether a fool. And then he suddenly realized that he was due for a week's leave, and that for once he could find something to do with it. . . .

He told no one of his intention, but he decided that his first step was to investigate the whole question of Higgins. It seemed to him that Higgins was being grossly neglected by everybody concerned. Besides, he knew a good deal about Higgins. He saw a good deal of the various studio attendants in his professional capacity, and he probably knew a good deal more about Higgins than did Caird—certainly more than Inspector Spears could have gathered at second or third hand. For Higgins had interested him; compelled his attention by his queer fits of bad temper, his occasional bursts of eloquent grievance; and simultaneously roused his pity by his obvious ill health, his hollow grey cheeks, his furtive pleading eyes, and his desperately threadbare appearance whenever he was not wearing his studio attendant's overalls. He had been, too, more impressed than he had admitted by Ian Macdonald's account of Higgins's quarrel with Parsons during the rehearsal of *The Scarlet Highwayman.* The impassive and taciturn Scot had been genuinely struck by the man's febrile fury in the face of Parsons's calculated insolence, and since his questioning by Inspector Spears on the night of the murder, Higgins had neither been seen nor heard of at Broadcasting House.

Accordingly, Bannister secured Higgins's address from the house superintendent's secretary—at a moment when that young woman was too busy with a question of the simultaneous accommodation of three different dance orchestras, a quintet, the National Chorus, and an orchestral concert specially compèred by Christopher Stone, to ask him why he wanted it—and made his way thither about the same time as Julian Caird entered Spears's office at Scotland Yard. The address in question was No. 17 Gentile Street, Soho, and was found to consist of a single room at the top of a dingy, narrow house. The rest of the house consisted of a greengrocer's shop and the same greengrocer's domestic accommodation for himself and his family.

Gentile Street runs eastward from Wardour Street towards Soho Square. Like various other Soho streets, it is mean and squalid, with many of the disagreeable features of similar streets in continental towns and none of the latter's attractiveness. The houses were old, tall and shabby, and seemed to lean towards one another from each side of the street. It smelt strongly of orange peel, of cats, of fish and chips; and, in the summer, of human sweat. Its pavements were always littered with dustbins and milk bottles, with orange peel and bits of old newspapers, among which thin cats slunk furtively, and dirty, sallow-skinned children played noisily.

Apart from Higgins's greengrocer, its principal features were a café bar, much frequented at night by Negroes and harlots, and, a little farther along on the same side, a rather good little shop which sold Italian foodstuffs, with two sidelines in retailing dubious picture postcards, and serving as an accommodation address. It was not, therefore, easy for an amateur investigator, especially one of the striking individual appearance of Guy Bannister, to appear in Gentile Street without exciting a good deal of comment. At the same time he knew it would be entirely against the rules to go straight to No. 17 and ask to see Higgins. To be perfectly frank, he hadn't the least idea what he should do if he were brought face to face with the man. . . .

First of all, therefore, he entered the Italian shop, purchased a quantity of salami sausage—which led to a considerable controversy with his landlady later the same evening, when she maintained that nothing which smelt so strongly could be or should be edible—began a discussion with the proprietor upon the respective merits of macaroni, spaghetti, and vermicelli, and ultimately brought the talk round to Higgins. But Signor Balbo, who wore tiny pointed waxed moustaches and a black shirt under a seedy coat, apparently neither knew Higgins even by sight nor cared about him in any capacity whatsoever. In fact, he became indignant.

"Why could he not have come to me for a room?" he demanded, with an emotional sweep of his right hand towards the strings of onions that hung from his ceiling. "Why should he go to No. 17? No. 17 is a bad house, a dirty house. The man Carter who owns it, he is a Socialist—a Communist. He sells bad vegetables. He does not like me because I am loyal to Mussolini. His rooms are dark. I have a fine, light room to let. Why should your friend not have come here?" He struck himself smartly on the chest and glared at Bannister, who realized too late that he had thrust himself upon the unfortunate Carter's most deadly political and business rival. To cover his confusion, he purchased a large bottle of Chianti and beat a retreat most uncomfortably burdened.

The bar was no better. It might be said that it was worse, for it did not even provide salami and Chianti. It being the morning, it was entirely empty, except for an anemic young woman, with protruding front teeth and in a dirty overall, who was slopping dirty water on a discoloured oilcloth-covered counter with a complete absence of conviction and an almost equally complete absence of result. She did not even bother to look up when Bannister spoke to her.

"Nothink doin' yet," she observed laconically. "Too early. Everyone's asleep except me, and I wish *I* was."

Bannister enquired whether she knew a man called Higgins who lived at No. 17.

"Never 'eard of 'im," said the young woman. "Nor don't want to. But if 'e comes in 'ere, 'e must be barmy or a bad lot. They don't 'ave no other kinds." She slopped more water onto the counter and dabbed at a discoloured tea urn with a dirty piece of rag. "You might come in tonight and ask Mr. Butter, but I warns yer, it's a pretty tough crowd 'ere. Leave yer gold watch and yer five-pound notes at 'ome!" With which she turned her back on him.

Bannister, observing that from the café it was possible to see not only the door but also the upper windows of No. 17, decided that he would avail himself of her advice and use the place as an observation point if he failed to complete his investigations before evening.

Then he walked hurriedly across the street and entered the shop of J. Carter, greengrocer. For a moment Bannister had considerable sympathy with Signor Balbo. Whether its produce was bad or not, he couldn't tell, but dirty the shop certainly was. It was dark and dusty, with stained and grimy windows. It was full of assorted smells. Three flypapers hung from the ceiling, each thickly coated with a nauseating glutinous mass of victims, some still faintly twitching—and yet live flies beyond everywhere. A mangy fox terrier lay just inside the door, biting at the roots of its own tail. If this was the shop window of the house, thought Bannister, what unspeakable horrors of darkness and corruption might not be hidden in the rooms above?

More prosaically, how could anyone endure to live over such an accumulation of filth, such a concentration of offensive odours? He would have fled incontinently, except that a fat woman with a pencil behind her ear and a large cauliflower in one hand emerged out of the shadows at the back of the shop and asked him what she could do for him. Bannister took the bull by the horns.

"Forgive my asking," he began, "but I believe you have a man called Higgins who lodges with you?"

"We 'ave a lodger," the woman admitted cautiously.

"And his name's Higgins," Bannister repeated. "He works at the B. B. C."

"That's what 'e told Mr. Carter—that's my 'usband," said the woman, "—though I can't say as 'ow I ever believed it meself. *I've* never 'eard 'is voice on the wireless, and I'm what they calls a regular listener in the *Radio Times*. I wrote and told 'em so."

"Did you, indeed?" said Bannister politely.

"I certainly did," said Mrs. Carter with asperity. "Why not? Don't I pay my ten shillings like everybody else? Isn't my money as good as theirs?"

Bannister assured her hastily that it was so.

"Exactly," said Mrs. Carter emphatically. "But I can't stand 'ere gossiping with you, unless it's in the way of business, of course."

For a moment Bannister harboured the insane notion of adding a pound or so of dubious potatoes and a couple of wilting cabbages to what he had already purchased from Signor Balbo. But he remembered a curious weakness shared by all members of the lower classes for discussing illness or disease. And he baited his hook accordingly.

"You mustn't think," he said, "that I've come here to gossip about Higgins. Not at all. This is—er—well, almost a medical enquiry, if I may put it like that. You see, I come from the B. B. C. myself."

"Oh, *do* yer?" interrupted Mrs. Carter. "Then why didn't yer say so at fust, instead of encouraging me to make a fool of meself?"

"Higgins hasn't put in an appearance during the last two days, and we wondered if he was ill, as he hasn't sent any message to explain why he hasn't turned up."

"Ill!" snorted Mrs. Carter. "Ho, yus, I *don't* think!"

"Might one ask why not?" enquired Bannister.

"Because if 'e's ill, why is it 'e goes out nights? Stayed in both these last two days, 'e 'as. Only goes out when it's dark, round about ten o'clock at night. A man who's ill doesn't gad about the streets in the dark, unless 'e's cracked!"

"You have seen him during these last two days, then, Mrs. Carter?"

"Well—'ardly," the greengrocer's wife admitted. "But I've seen 'im slippin' out. Couldn't 'elp that, sittin' in my window on the first floor as I do of an evenin'. I see most things in Gentile Street from that window. Very 'andy it is."

"Then Higgins is in now?"

" 'E's in. At least, I left 'is breakfast outside 'is door and it's not there now. Shall I tell 'im you're 'ere?"

Bannister hesitated for a moment.

"No, don't tell him I'm here," he said at last. "It seems to me as if he'd got some private trouble. I don't want to butt in."

"Just as yer please, of course," said Mrs. Carter. "Trouble 'Iggins may be in, but as for its bein' private, I reads my *Daily 'Erald* regular and it looks to me as if 'Iggins' trouble might have something to do with what was referred to in the paper this morning as 'a matter of public interest'—this 'ere murder at the B. B. C." She leaned forward, breathing heavily, and pointed a stubby thumb at Bannister's chest. "I don't want no murderers in my 'ouse, young man. If you don't want to see Mr. 'Iggins, I bloomin' well do, and that's what I'm going to tell 'im flat, see? I'm goin' to 'ave 'im out of 'ere by tomorrow mornin' at the latest!"

Bannister drew back hastily and murmured "Good-morning." As he turned, he almost cannoned into a thin-featured little man in a cloth cap.

" 'Ere, mind where yer going," said the latter. " 'Alf a pound of tomatoes, missus. H'English."

Bannister, who had taken a violent dislike to Mrs. Carter, could not resist a parting shot.

"I beg your pardon," he said, taking off his hat. "I'm glad to see, Mrs. Carter, that you're so broad-minded as both to read the *Daily Herald* and to support the Imperial Idea by selling English produce."

The only reply he drew was an indignant snort.

He walked away along Gentile Street, by no means displeased with his first essay in the art of practical detection, disappeared into the first public telephone box he saw, and asked for Temple Bar 2261, which was Julian Caird's number.

CHAPTER XVII

EVANS *VERSUS* SPEARS

"I'M GRATEFUL to you for asking for this interview," was Inspector Spears's greeting to Stewart Evans, when the latter arrived in his office a few minutes after Rodney Fleming's departure.

"Really, Inspector?" said Evans. "May I ask why?"

"Merely because it saves me the trouble of asking you to come here myself. I'm getting full statements from everybody in Broadcasting House that night whose movements cannot be fully accounted for by the corroborative evidence of other people."

"I see," said Evans. "That celebrated Scotland Yard method, which includes any amount of enquiry into details. I shall be delighted to answer any question you put to me, but first of all perhaps you'll give me the opportunity of saying why I wanted to see you."

"All in good time, Mr. Evans. Sit down, won't you? In the first place, how old are you?"

"Forty-four."

"And you've been with the B. B. C.—how long?"

"Four years."

"You work in Mr. Caird's department?"

"I do."

"Would you mind telling me, Mr. Evans, just why you should have been working, as I gather you were, in your own office long after office hours on the night of the tragedy?"

Evans leaned forward in his chair and clasped his rather podgy hands together between his knees. With his bald head, his big tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, his thin-lipped mouth and rather pointed ears, he gave the impression of a malicious gnome.

"My dear Inspector," he said condescendingly, "I'm afraid you share the general prevalent belief that the work of composing broadcasting programmes is purely one of routine. Oddly enough, it's nothing of the sort. It calls for a singular combination of artistic, dramatic, and journalistic talent. A fact which was recognized by the authorities when they created Programme Research, to which I belong. I work outside office hours, Inspector, because often it is easier for me to work outside them than inside them. During the day I am liable to perpetual interruptions, so that when I am doing creative work, I frequently return to the office after dinner and work quietly and without interruption in my own office."

"Did Mr. Caird know you were working late like this on that particular night?"

"No."

"Shouldn't he have known?"

"Mr. Caird's control of Programme Research is purely administrative," said Evans. "Our methods of work, thank God, are entirely our own affair."

"Was it a thing you had done before?"

"Dozens of times. If you want corroboration of that, you can get it from the commissionaires at the reception desk, who've seen me come in and go out."

"Do other members of Programme Research work like that?"

"I believe so," said Evans indifferently. "We all have our own ways of working."

"I see. Now, Mr. Evans, did you know Sidney Parsons?"

"Never. Nor did I ever set eyes on him."

"And Mr. Dryden?"

"I have the honour," said Evans formally, "to be a friend of Mrs. Dryden's. It is in that capacity that I wanted to see you."

"I see," said Spears. "Then we'll leave that for the moment. Do you know Mr. Fleming?"

"I've met him in Caird's office. Conceited young ass."

"You don't like him?"

"I've no particular reason to dislike him, except that he has achieved success, as most of these so-called promising young men do, by doing facile, bad work and getting away with it. In my view, Caird had no business to accept that extremely silly piece. But such a point of view can't be of any importance."

"You didn't listen to the performance of *The Scarlet Highwayman,* Mr. Evans?"

"Certainly not. I've too much respect for my mind. Romantic twaddle! Caird's like that, Inspector. He ought to have died in the first year of the Great War. I believe he's got an honest weakness for uniforms, crusades, *The Prisoner of Zenda*—all that tushery.

There's something a bit ironic, when you come to think of it, in a romantic medievalist being in charge of a department of broadcasting."

"Leaving that aside," said Spears gently, "when did you first hear of the tragedy?"

"My office, Inspector, is on the fourth floor. About half-past ten, I went down to the canteen to have some food after my work. The work, by the way, was a special adaptation for broadcasting of Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* which I am producing very shortly. Caird will confirm that for you," he added, with a sneer. "Coming back from the canteen, I met Caird, and I gathered from conversation with him that something had gone wrong with the transmission. He seemed in an odd state—nervous and, even for him, unusually offensive."

"A pair of you," thought Spears to himself.

"I admit I was interested," Evans went on. "I made enquiries at the reception desk, and I understood that Scotland Yard had been sent for. As Caird no doubt has told you, I'm interested in criminology. I hung about until after your men had taken their photographs, and so forth, and I have to confess to having corrupted one of them to the extent of a ten-shilling note to tell me all he knew. You won't drop on him for that, will you?"

"If I dropped on anyone," said Spears shortly, "it would be you, Mr. Evans. You're too old a man to indulge in that sort of idiotic conduct. Well, what else have you to tell me?"

"Simply this, Inspector. I know the official police aren't supposed to jump to conclusions, but I'm not one of them, so I may be able to save you trouble by putting you onto a short cut. Leopold Dryden's your man!"

Spears looked up.

"You know, Mr. Evans, this is a pretty serious accusation to make."

"I don't give a damn how serious it is! Leopold Dryden's one of those actors who call themselves artists with a big A. He's as conceited as the devil and selfish as blazes—simply because he's got a handsome profile and wavy hair, and can spout lines like an organ without having the slightest idea what they mean. As I told you, I'm a friend of his wife's. She's been good enough on one or two occasions to ask me to their flat. I don't know if you've met Mrs. Dryden outside this case, but she's a singularly charming woman. Kind, well bred, altogether delightful."

"I don't quite see how this——" began Spears.

"Wait a minute. Dryden treats her like dirt. He's inconsiderate; he's jealous; he's abominably rude to her in front of other people. He's even rude to her friends. You may think that it's my vanity that's been injured, because I'm talking like this, Inspector, but there's a lot more to it than that. I don't expect a man like Dryden to fall on my neck—I'm not his kind—but I do expect a little common civility when his wife asks me to dinner."

"How long ago did this—incident—take place, Mr. Evans?"

"About ten days. But I'm not calling Dryden a murderer because he's been rude to his wife and to me. I'm not even going to tell you *why* he murdered Parsons. I don't know that—yet. But in my view—the sensible psychological view—he's just the type of man who would murder, and that's why I investigated the possibilities, assuming that he was guilty."

"Go on," said Spears.

"Now I knew, for your police had said so, that Parsons had been strangled by a man wearing gloves. What had happened to those gloves?"

"As we had no chance of searching presumable murderers, I don't know," said Spears. "I expect he's still got them, or more likely still, he burned them, or slung them into the Thames."

"You might have made a search, all the same, Inspector," said Evans, getting up and going forward to the desk. "Whose are those?" And he whanged down a pair of gloves on Spears's blotting pad.

Spears took them up and looked at them closely.

"Well?" he said.

"These gloves," said Evans deliberately, "were found by me in a cupboard belonging to the studio attendant Higgins, which is just inside the triangular listening room outside 7C. Your people probably didn't bother to search it, because when it's closed the cupboard door is flush with the wall. I should perhaps add that Caird turned up while I was searching the cupboard. That was late last night—again after office hours. Please, Inspector, don't imitate his extraordinarily fatuous example and ask me whether I suspect Higgins, will you?"

"You say the gloves belong to Leopold Dryden?"

"They do. Any other actor in London will confirm that. Look at them," and Evans held them up, dangling foolishly. "Look at the stitching. Look at those scalloped gauntlet wrists. No one but a *farceur* like Dryden would be seen dead in the things!"

"Curiously small for a man," said Spears, almost to himself.

"Quite," said Evans. "And a man who is proud of having small hands might easily murder his mother! I may tell you that that lazy swine Higgins was in the habit of leaving that cupboard door open because it was self-locking. Dryden had spotted that, and as he left 7C he obviously took one step into the triangular listening room, threw in the gloves, slammed the cupboard door, and moved away. It wouldn't have taken him twenty seconds."

"Do you know why Mr. Caird was prowling about so that he found you making your investigations last night?"

"No idea," shrugged Evans. "Perhaps he had ideas about gloves, too."

There was a pause, and Spears took up his notes, shuffled them together into a thick pile, slipped them into one of the drawers of his desk, and locked it. The gloves he put into his pocket.

"They are important evidence," he said, "and I'm grateful to you for having brought them to me. I would have been more grateful still if you'd pointed out the possibility and let the police find them in the normal way. But I shouldn't be too free and easy, if I were you, with your accusations against Leopold Dryden. The fact that his gloves were used by the murderer doesn't necessarily mean that *he* was the murderer. I'm not denying the value of psychological instinct, Mr. Evans, but there's one thing better, and that's cast-iron proof. And that's what I'm looking for."

Evans put on his hat.

"I expected that, Inspector," he said. "It doesn't depress me. You were bound to say it." He walked to the door and turned round. "Besides, when I come to see you again, I may be able to bring you cast-iron proof. There's no alternative, if you can't hang Leopold Dryden without it!"

The door closed behind him, and Spears took up his telephone:

"Can I see the assistant commissioner, please? Detective Inspector Spears speaking. . . . In twenty minutes, you say? . . . Thank you, that will do very well. Ring me, will you?"

CHAPTER XVIII

INTERLUDE IN A FLAT

BANNISTER's attempt to get Julian Caird on the telephone after leaving Mr. J. Carter's shop had failed, for Caird had not yet returned from his visit to Scotland Yard. There is little if any fun in hunting alone, so Bannister looked elsewhere for a companion for the chase. But now it was a little after eleven o'clock in the morning and therefore no longer impossibly early to call on a lady. And this Bannister proceeded to do.

Patricia Marsden lived with a girl friend in a small flat just off Mecklenburgh Square. She was nineteen, dark, and rather attractive, and two years before had run away from home to join the chorus of a musical comedy. Although the musical comedy in question had run successfully for a year, a chorus girl's life had proved neither so romantic nor so amusing as it had appeared hypothetically. Miss Marsden, who had been disowned in the good old-fashioned way by her rather tiresome county family, found life in London on three pounds a week to be very much "one damned thing after another." She was fortunate in making friends first with a common but extremely kind-hearted platinum blonde in her dressing room, who called herself Topsy Levine, which was certainly not her real name;

and in the second place with Guy Bannister, whom she met at a Bloomsbury party, and whom she appreciated extremely for the way in which he looked after her and took her home on the first occasion in her young life when she had had rather more to drink than was good for her. She was a merry little person, full of spirits, and always mad keen to indulge in a new experience. To Bannister she was a never-failingly delightful audience, and he thought that this adventure in Soho might appeal to her. In a way, of course, he would rather have had Caird, but he was not going to spend all day chasing him. And Caird had been a little cavalier with regard to Bannister's pretensions as a detective. . . .

Miss Marsden and Miss Levine received Guy Bannister's visit with enthusiasm. A lover of the conventions might have thought that rather less enthusiasm and rather more clothes would have been to the point. But the young ladies had only been up about half an hour and as, until four days ago, they had been accustomed, at eight performances a week, to appear for the benefit of tired business men in the very minimum of clothing, they could hardly be blamed for having their breakfast in wrappers over their underclothes and continuing so to do after admitting Guy Bannister to their flat.

The latter propounded his plan and asked Patricia if she would come with him.

"Come? I should jolly well think I would! But don't be mean, Guy. Let's take Topsy, too."

"If you don't," said that young lady elegantly, "you're just a mean skunk."

Bannister took off his spectacles and rubbed them absent-mindedly on a not very clean pocket handkerchief.

"I don't know about two of you," he said. "I'll guarantee to look after one all right, but there's just a chance it might turn risky."

"Come off it!" cried Topsy, springing up from the table and waltzing round the room with her wrapper streaming behind her, rather to Guy's embarrassment. "My middle name's risky, isn't it, Pat? Risky and Frisky and a little drop of Whiskey—I'm the girl for you!" And she collapsed into an armchair, screaming with laughter.

"Well, after that it doesn't seem to me that I've any alternative," said Bannister. "Now listen. We'll meet for dinner at Beltrano's at seven o'clock——"

"Oh, girls, the Fairy Prince will now appear!" said Miss Levine.

"Shut up, Topsy," said Pat. "Go on, Guy."

"There you shall dine, with luck, at my expense—though Topsy doesn't deserve to—and from there we're only about five minutes' walk from the corner of Gentile Street."

"What do you want us to wear?" asked Pat. "Something quiet, I suppose. Which means I'll have to lend Topsy a disguise."

"Beast!" said Topsy.

"I suppose so," said Guy. "No, by Jove! Nothing of the sort! I forgot. Our observation point is that café bar I was telling you about. I gather that quietness and respectability are the last qualifications of its clientele. You may follow your natural inclinations, darlings, as ladies of the chorus, and put all the make-up you've got left over from the run of *Viennese Hussar* on your sweet little faces."

"Get ourselves up like a couple of tarts, in fact?"

"Topsy, I'm ashamed of you," said Patricia. "We know quite well what Guy means, and we'll be dressed and ready on time. Good-bye, Guy. We ought to be getting dressed."

"We ought," said Miss Levine. "That telephone call from Charlie Cochran not having come through, we will now proceed to our usual round of the agents. *Good*-morning, Mr. Bannister." After which, with an elegantly executed back kick, Topsy Levine disappeared into the bedroom.

"Do you think she'll behave herself?" said Guy.

Patricia smiled.

"She'll behave herself if we can manage to persuade her that she's not in a melodrama at the Lyceum. Anyway, you can count on me to gag her if necessary. So long, Guy."

"So long, Pat."

And Guy Bannister took his leave to lunch at a pub on a ham roll and a pint of stout, brooding the while on the possibilities that the evening might bring forth.

CHAPTER XIX

NIGHT IN SOHO

A LITTLE after eight o'clock that evening, Bannister and his two companions turned into Gentile Street, entered the café bar, and sat down at a table which, there being no actual door to the bar, had its two outside legs practically on the pavement. Guy had intended to make a preliminary reconnaissance in the direction of No. 17 to make sure that Higgins was at home, but as soon as he sat down he saw that there was a light in the top window of No. 17. And a little later, as he ordered the drinks, the silhouette of a tall thin man passed clearly across the lighted window.

So far, the café was anything but full. In the farthest corner a mechanical piano ground out a succession of out-of-date tunes. Three Negroes and a couple of pathetically elderly street-walkers lounged against the bar, while at an adjacent table a man who looked like a cross between a publican, a bookmaker, and a pugilist was drinking beer and talking racing to the proprietor, Mr. Butter, and the thin little man against whom Bannister had bumped in the greengrocer's shop that morning. Mr. Butter lived up to his name in his appearance. His corpulence was terrific; his eyes mere slits in his vast and pendulous cheeks; his nose a smaller fat blob upon the large fat blob which was his face. But though his business was small and the café empty, there was little about Bannister and the two girls to draw attention or suspicion. Bannister himself was never particular about his clothes. His collars and cuffs tended to indeterminate grubbiness, his trousers to bagginess at the knees. Tonight, in addition, he wore a shapeless black hat with the brim turned down, and smoked shag in a short clay pipe. "Which I call overdoing the necessary atmosphere," Pat Marsden had said when he first lighted it.

Pat and Topsy wore respectively bright red and bright green jumpers, and tiny, three-cornered woollen caps to match, cocked very much over one eye and revealing considerable expanses of dark brown and platinum blonde hair. Shoes rather down at heel and stockings of so artificial a silk that they positively glittered, combined with rather more than the usual application of lipstick and make-up, completed their ensemble: an ensemble defined by Bannister, straining desperately after epigram, as being "too true to be good."

Outside, the street was rapidly darkening. A wind was rising, and black clouds coming up from the southwest were shredded across the full moon. Torn pages of old newspapers fluttered raspingly along the pavement. Dust rose and scattered in little whorls. A barrel organ was trundled along to compete unsuccessfully with the mechanical piano, and after a little was trundled away again. A taxi drew up outside, and its driver came in for a cup of coffee and the exchange of a couple of dirty stories with Mr. Butter. Guy Bannister bought another packet of Players, more lager beer for himself, and a second round of gin and ginger beer for his accomplices. And still the light burned in the window at the top of the dark and gloomy house numbered 17, and the silhouette of Higgins passed and repassed intermittently, as though he already prowled like one of the greater cats in captivity behind bars.

The café began to fill up. The mechanical piano was hard put to it to prevail against shouting and raucous laughter. The smoke of cheap cigarettes eddied in clouds up to the ceiling. Occasionally a glass was smashed, or a woman screamed—each noise invariably followed by a howl of laughter. Mr. Butter retired behind the bar, to give a hand to the overdriven barman, and cursed the latter for having to do so. One of the Negroes struck another across the mouth and was promptly pitched into the street.

"I'm not sure that I'm not getting a bit scared," Pat Marsden whispered across the table.

"All I know is," said Topsy, "that if I drink any more of this fizzy stuff I shall go up like a balloon! All right, Guy, don't look so worried. I've got clean undies on!"

"I am a bit worried all the same," Bannister confessed. "I thought he would have gone out by now, and we'd have followed him. Sssh!"

A little man with a grubby can, a check bow tie, and buttoned boots had stopped beside Guy's chair.

"May I sit here?" he said in a gentle, rather refined tone. "Beg pardon if I intrude, but I suffer with my throat, and it's so smoky inside by the bar. I'd be grateful if I might drink my coffee here."

"By all means," said Guy. "We'll probably be shifting now at any moment."

The stranger grinned placatingly, sat down, and sipped at his coffee.

"Haven't had the pleasure of seeing you here before, have I?" he enquired after a little. "Oh, I beg your pardon," and he took off his cap and put it carefully under his chair.

"Don't mention it," said Topsy cheerfully. "All friends here tonight.'

"Thanks, I'm sure. Do you live about here? I've been in Gentile Street—No. 13—for seven years."

"Picturesque neighbourhood," said Guy.

"Picturesque's the word," said the little man. "*And* interesting, I can tell you. You can take my word for it, you see a bit of life in Gentile Street. Things happen you wouldn't believe."

"Really?" said Guy absent-mindedly, doing his best to listen to the stranger and simultaneously to concentrate with all his senses on that lighted window across the street.

"Oh, yes," the stranger rattled on happily. "Surprising, the people who live in this part of the world. Would you believe that you'd find a member of the staff of the B. B. C. living in this street?"

"You don't say!" said Topsy admiringly, leaning forward with her chin on her hands and her elbows on the table, looking, it must be admitted, exceedingly pretty in a rather overpowering way.

The stranger blinked.

"Corkran's my name, miss—Alf Corkran. Very fond of music, that's what I am, and a steady listener twice a week. Not that dance-band stuff, but the wireless military band, that's my line. Something classical. So when I found out that this chap—Higgins, his name is—works at Broadcasting House, I pulled up with him. Very interesting, their work must be."

Bannister transferred his concentration from the window to the man.

"Yes," he said tensely. "Go on."

"Well, we used to go about together a bit," said Mr. Corkran. "Have drinks in the evening. Not so much here—Higgins had a prejudice against Negroes, but there's quite a nice little pub down at the end of the street—the Blue Unicorn."

"I know it," said Bannister. He didn't; but he wanted to encourage Mr. Corkran.

"Naturally, I was particularly interested when that murder happened the other day at the B. B. C.," Mr. Corkran continued.

"Ooh!" said Topsy, and Pat Marsden kicked her ankle viciously under the table.

"I hoped I might get what they call a bit of inside information from this chap Higgins. But he's been very queer just lately. I found him in the Blue Unicorn last night, carrying a parcel, he was, and to tell you the truth, he wasn't strictly sober. Well, I picked the parcel up casually, and it weighed more than you'd believe. But he snatched it away from me as if I'd been trying to steal it—wouldn't have a drink or anything.

I was so struck, I went in today and enquired for him."

"The devil you did!" thought Bannister.

"And, believe it or not, Mrs. Carter told me that he hadn't been out today. All the makings of a drama there, don't you think, mister?" He finished his coffee and sat staring at Bannister with shining eyes.

"I wonder what he had in that parcel," said Pat.

"Yes, by George, so do I!" said Guy.

"Sorry I can't tell you, miss. He snatched it away too quick. I think I'll try and look him up again tomorrow. It's good of you to have let me sit with you like this. So long, all." He replaced his cap, took it off ceremoniously to the two girls, and walked out into Gentile Street carrying it in his hand.

"What do you think that means, Guy?"

"My dear, I don't know, except that it seems to me the plot thickens. Hullo!"

"What is it, Guy?"

"Can't you see?" said Bannister. "The light's out. Get ready to move quick. I'll just pay the bill. I want to get somewhere where it isn't so light, so that we can watch the doorway for him and see where he goes as soon as he comes out."

"I get you," said Topsy. "Overture, beginners, please! We'll be there." And she dropped her half-finished cigarette into her tumbler.

CHAPTER XX

THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

WHEN entirely frank with himself, or in an unusually bad temper, Detective Inspector Spears admitted to a disapproval of Major Cavendish, the assistant commissioner, that almost amounted to dislike. Spears was one of a good many members of the police force who felt it as a personal grievance that since the war so many military officers had been called in to fill the highest posts at Scotland Yard, and he had all the policeman's natural suspicion of the regular soldier. It was not, he said to himself, that he objected to discipline, but officers like Major Cavendish—who had behind him a record of twenty years' service in English and Indian cavalry regiments—seemed to put discipline first and results, in comparison, nowhere.

So he was not in a particularly good humour as he walked along the corridor to the assistant commissioner's room. He wished he had not asked for the interview, although he knew that his main object in asking for it had been to forestall being sent for.

He knocked and walked in.

Major Cavendish was making notes in the margin of a typed report and continued to read to the bottom of his page before he looked up. He had the handsome, narrow Norman head to be seen so often on parade grounds, polo fields, and out hunting; a stubborn, courageous head, not overburdened with imagination. Hard grey eyes, a cropped military moustache, grizzled fair hair, and a formidable chin completed the picture.

Spears moved a pace nearer to the assistant commissioner's desk and coughed. Major Cavendish folded the report deliberately, put it into a drawer, and locked it up.

"Yes, I heard you come in, Spears," he said. "I wish you'd remember that if you've got an appointment, or if I've sent for you, I don't want you to knock. This is an office, not a young lady's bedroom."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Spears stiffly.

"That's all right. Sit down. Smoke, if you want to. As a matter of fact, I'm glad you came in, Spears. I had intended to have a talk with you this morning, anyway. As perhaps you know, the commissioner's abroad. As you probably don't know, I have to see the Home Secretary this afternoon about this Broadcasting House case. I want to know from you exactly how we stand. I know you haven't had very long, but isn't it time we had an arrest?"

"The press seem to think so, sir."

"The press can go on thinking," snapped Major Cavendish. "The point is that *I'm* beginning to think so. After all, there can't be any lack of material evidence. I presume you've had time to question everyone involved? Are you really at sea, or have you made up your own mind and can't prove it?" The assistant commissioner dropped his martinet's manner and became almost pleasantly confidential. "You see, Spears, this isn't an ordinary case. You know what broadcasting is. It gets the public in their homes. There are nearly five million people who feel as if anything that happens inside Broadcasting House has happened by their own firesides. Not that this murder's harmed broadcasting. Licenses have jumped up about ten thousand in the last two days. But the public do want this particular murder solved. If you don't solve it quickly, you're liable to get an amount of amateur help you never dreamed of. I suppose you're not forgetting that every listener who heard that damned play heard the murder committed? That means a few thousand amateur detectives on the trail. I shouldn't be pleased if one of them solved it by a fluke and left us standing."

"Nor should I, sir."

"Very well. Let's have your difficulties. Is it no suspect?"

"Just the reverse, sir. There's a perfectly good case to be made out against four people, with a possible fifth. There's nothing to be proved against any of them, so far."

"Suppose," said Major Cavendish, "you give me each of these cases in brief." He pressed a button on his desk, and a stenographer appeared from the adjoining room. "I'll have your five cases taken down and tabulated, and then I'll have something cut and dried for the Home Secretary this afternoon. Go ahead." It was typical that he did not speak directly to the stenographer, and that she, without further instructions, pulled up a chair, sat down, and opened her notebook, looking up expectantly at Spears.

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Damn your best! I want accuracy. Go ahead."

"First of all, then," said Spears, "there's this studio attendant, Higgins."

The stenographer began to scribble. Major Cavendish took an already filled pipe from a small bronze Indian ashtray beside him, lit it, and leaned back in his chair, gazing up at the ceiling.

"The case against Higgins," continued Spears, "is that, in the first place, there's reliable evidence that he quarrelled with the deceased during the rehearsals of the play during the performance of which the latter was killed. He is an ex-soldier. He has suffered both from gas and shell shock during the war, appears to be thoroughly neurotic, down at heel, and in financial straits. His domestic background is miserable. He is separated from his wife, to whom he pays a substantial separation allowance. He lives in a single room on the top floor of a house in Gentile Street."

"Poor devil!" muttered the assistant commissioner.

"He admits to having attempted to begin an affair with one of the girls employed in the canteen at Broadcasting House. The attempt was apparently not reciprocated by the young woman. There's corroborative evidence of this. He undoubtedly had opportunity to commit the crime. He was on duty on the floor of the studio in which the murder was committed. We are fortunate in being able to tell exactly when the murder was committed—at any rate, within a minute or two. After taking the evidence of the various people most nearly concerned, I put it at between eight and ten minutes past ten. At that time Higgins was absent from his post. He admits as much. His story is that he made a date with his canteen girl to meet him in one of the offices, which are outside the studio tower; that he kept that appointment, but the girl did not. I have questioned the girl; she denies that any such appointment was made. I think it is only fair to add, sir, that though I did my best not to scare her, she seemed frightened out of her life, and in my view may quite well be lying in making such a denial. Since my questioning, Higgins has not returned to Broadcasting House and has sent no message to explain why."

"You've got him under observation?"

Spears looked pained.

"Yes, sir, of course. He can't get away, if that's what you mean."

"All right. Let's get on to number two."

"Number two is Julian Caird, the dramatic director who was producing the play."

Major Cavendish raised his eyebrows.

"Do you seriously suspect Caird, Spears?"

"Speaking personally, no, sir. But he's bound to be on any list. Of course, there's no motive that I've been able to discover as yet, and he denies having known Parsons at all, except as an actor."

"Some people," said Major Cavendish, with a suspicion of a twinkle, "might consider that any actor was any producer's fair game. But perhaps murder is going a little far, however bad an actor the fellow may be!"

"Just before the murder was committed," went on Spears, taking no notice of his superior's interruption, "Caird left the dramatic control-panel room and, according to his own story, must have passed studio 7C during the very moment at which the crime was being committed. Not on his way down to Studio 6A, sir, but on his way back. There's evidence that he went to 6A all right, and the reason he gave for coming down is confirmed, though it still seems to me that he would have done as well to have stayed where he was rather than go rushing about the place. But Desmond Hancock, the man left in the dramatic control-panel room, can't give the exact time of Caird's return. Very naturally, he says he was busy on his job and didn't notice exactly when Caird came back. Undoubtedly it was physically possible for Caird to have done the killing. At the same time, his background is unexceptionable, his record at the B.B.C. good, his financial position stable. He seems to have been in rather a jumpy state that night, but presumably the fact that he was in charge of a complicated production explains that."

"All right," said the assistant commissioner. "Next."

"Rodney Fleming," said Spears.

Major Cavendish whistled.

"One of our bright young hopeful authors? You *are* asking for trouble, Spears. What about him? From your tone of voice, I gather you don't like Mr. Fleming. Was he funny at your expense?"

"He did his best to be, sir. As a matter of fact, there's a pretty strong case against him. First of all, he wrote the play."

"Was it as bad as that, Spears?—I'm sorry. I must cure myself of pulling your leg. Carry on."

"Secondly, he suggested Parsons as one of the cast. Admittedly, there's a good reason for his having done so, but it shows that he had some knowledge of him before. In the third place, unlike the average author, he took the trouble to go to Broadcasting House on the night of the transmission. And again I must admit he had a pretty good reason for doing so. It was not unnatural that he should want to see the wheels go round."

Major Cavendish nodded.

"About evens so far," he murmured. "Where was he at eight minutes past ten?"

"Well, that's the point, sir. The listening room in 6A, where he says he was, is exactly forty seconds' distance from the door into 7C. I've timed it. If he wasn't doing the job, he was nearer to it than anybody else, except Caird, who may have been actually in the passage outside the door."

"Why was he in that room?"

"He says—and Caird confirms it—that he had asked to be put somewhere where he could see the scenes in his play being acted in 6A, and that listening room was the only place that could fulfil that condition. Secondly, he had asked to be put somewhere where he could get a private telephone call he was expecting. That was possible in the listening room, but would have been most inconvenient if he had been up with Caird in the dramatic control-panel room."

"H'm," said Major Cavendish.

"Exactly, sir. It all looks a bit peculiar. It looks even more peculiar when I tell you that that telephone call came through at almost precisely the same moment as Caird left the D.C. panel room. So I went into it pretty carefully, and there's no doubt about it, it came through. This is checked by the girl on the B.B.C. exchange. It came from Leeds, as Fleming said it did, and it lasted for six minutes. We have Caird's evidence that Fleming was still talking when he came up from his visit to 6A, and we've the further evidence of the telephone girl, for during those six minutes she listened in two or three times for an instant to see whether the call was still in, and in each case it was. Naturally—though rather unfortunately for us—she didn't listen to the conversation. I haven't had time to check up the Leeds end of the call yet, but I've had Fleming's explanation, and it rings pretty true on the face of it. I'll deal with the Leeds end, of course."

"If the Leeds end's all right, that lets him out," said Major Cavendish frowning. "Unless, of course, he and Caird are accomplices."

"I confess I hadn't thought of that," said Spears.

"Well, think of it now. Though I don't believe it for a second. What about Mr. Fleming's background?"

"Right as a trivet, sir. He made quite a lot of money recently, and is generally regarded as one of the coming young men, as you said yourself. There's no apparent motive that I can see."

"H'm," said Major Cavendish again and knocked out his pipe. "I think I can guess number four for you, as you've got both author and producer on the list. I suppose you really came to ask me whether I would back you up if you took the responsibility of arresting Mr. Leopold Dryden?"

"Well, sir, I *was* going to ask you that," Spears confessed.

"It'll make the deuce of a scandal," sighed the assistant commissioner. "What have you got on him?"

"Quite a good deal, I'm afraid, sir. To begin with, he was quite unlike his usual self that night—there's any amount of evidence to that. He'd quarrelled with his wife at dinner. He has refused to give me any explanation of his conduct or movements at all, but she gave me a lying explanation of that quarrel. He was supposed to be in Studio 6A during the time when the crime was committed, and just about eight minutes after ten he got leave from the studio manager to go out for a breath of fresh air, saying he felt ill. He went up to the seventh floor, quite unnecessarily, to go outside the studio tower for his fresh air, and was met by Julian Caird inside the studio tower on the seventh floor when Caird was on his way back from 6A, looking, according to the latter, perfectly ghastly. Today I came into possession of a pair of his peculiarly distinctive gloves, which had been hidden in a cupboard in the triangular listening room just outside 7C. And finally, amongst Parsons' papers were found three letters from Dryden's wife which made it perfectly clear that Parsons had been blackmailing her by threatening to reveal to her husband some incident in her past. Mrs. Dryden broke down at being confronted with one of these letters, which was as good as admitting that it was over the arrival of one of them that the quarrel at dinner before the performance between herself and her husband had occurred. Oh, yes, sir—and one more thing. When we searched the studio we found a piece of the outside sheet of Parsons' script of the play had been torn away. I happened to notice a little green label which says that these scripts are the property of the B.B.C. and are not to be mutilated in any way. I asked Mr. Caird if they were often torn or defaced, and he said that they were frequently marked at rehearsal, but seldom torn." Spears dropped his voice impressively and went on: "I found that torn piece of paper, sir, screwed up like a spill, with one end charred, and shoved into one of those funnel ashtrays. That ashtray was on a slab in the triangular listening room outside 7C. The murderer had screwed the paper up, put a match to it, and jammed it into the ashtray, where, unfortunately for him, it went out."

"But what did he want it for?" asked Major Cavendish impatiently.

"I don't exactly know, sir, but these words were left on the part of the paper that wasn't burned: 'your darling Isabel.' They were in Parsons' handwriting. And Isabel is the name of Dryden's wife."

"Then you think——"

"I think I am justified in deducing from that, sir, that Parsons had written some sort of message referring to Dryden's wife to Dryden on the outside of his script, and that Dryden tore it off to avoid having attention drawn to him."

"Damn it, I must confess I'd rather it was any one of the others," said the assistant commissioner. "But I don't see how a coroner can help himself in face of this little set of bouquets. The inquest's tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'm afraid you'd better take a pair of large-sized handcuffs, Spears."

"Small ones, sir," corrected Spears, smiling delightedly at the opportunity of catching his superior officer out. "Dryden's got singularly small hands, of which he's very proud."

"I don't think their size matters at all," said the assistant commissioner chillingly. "But look here, Spears, didn't you say you had a fifth candidate?"

"He's only a 'possible,' sir. Mr. Stewart Evans. But I've very little against him, except that he's generally disliked, not very successful, happened to be in the building that night for what seemed to me a thoroughly inadequate reason, and has been indulging in private detective work on his own, apparently trying to pin the crime onto Leopold Dryden. It was he who brought me the gloves."

"If *he* found the gloves, *you* ought to have been able to, Spears. I hope you've told off whichever of your men let you down over that. Evans. . . . It doesn't seem much to go on, certainly."

"He obviously hates Dryden, and I should say he has a weakness for Dryden's wife," said Spears. "But that's no reason why he should murder Parsons—he'd never even spoken to him. That's the lot, sir."

Major Cavendish sat up.

"Very well, Spears. Thank you." He turned to the stenographer. "Type that, please. I shall want it before lunch. I'll speak to you again tomorrow morning before the inquest, Spears. It seems to me we're between the devil and the deep sea. We can either give the press the time of their lives by confessing that we're baffled, or give them the finest story of the year by arresting Leopold Dryden. However, I expect the inquest will force our hands. You don't seem to have done badly so far, Spears, but don't let up on it. Good luck!" He picked up an umbrella and a bowler hat from a chair in the corner and went out.

Spears and the stenographer looked sympathetically at each other. " 'It's a way we have in the Army,' " hummed Spears ruefully.

" 'Brutal and licentious soldiery,' I don't think," said the stenographer, who knew her Kipling. "You might as well work for a block of wood!"

"You might, I might, we all might," said Spears. "What's the odds?"

He left the room in his turn and achieved a certain amount of satisfaction by slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXI

A SHOT IN THE DARK

HIGGINS emerged from the shadowy doorway of No. 17 just as his three watchers came level with it on the opposite pavement. He stood for a moment under a lamppost, giving Bannister ample opportunity to observe that he was unshaven, more white-faced than ever, and unsteady on his feet—the latter probably from drink. Bareheaded and with neither collar nor tie, he reminded Guy of the illustrations of prisoners on their way to the guillotine.

Higgins looked up and down the street, cleared his throat and spat into the gutter, and then marched off eastwards along the pavement. He took no notice of the tall, spectacled young man with a black hat and clay pipe who followed about fifteen yards behind him, a girl hanging onto each of his arms and the whole party uplifting their voices in such unmelodious song as to draw a distinctly unfavourable glance from the policeman on point duty at the corner opposite the Blue Unicorn. Higgins vanished into the saloon bar, and there followed the deplorable spectacle of a B.B.C. official arm in arm with two young women whose appearance left little doubt as to their occupation entering the private bar of the most disreputable of Soho public houses and drinking tepid beer therein with every appearance of satisfaction, to the accompaniment of much laughter and ribald conversation. What might not have been observed was the way in which Topsy Levine's bright little eyes kept Higgins under steady observation through the gap which showed conveniently between the glass and wooden panels of the partition which separated the private from the saloon bar. She slopped a good proportion of her second half-pint onto Guy Bannister's trousers and, under cover of leaning over to mop it up with her handkerchief, whispered that Higgins had already drunk two double whiskies neat and had ordered a third.

"It isn't going to help us much if he passes out," whispered Guy uneasily. "Oh, damn!"

The genteel Mr. Alf Corkran sidled into the bar, expressed the greatest pleasure at meeting them again, and insisted on standing a round.

"Pleasant surprise," he observed, "though I won't say that I didn't come in half expecting to find old Higgins here. I'm sorry for that chap."

Pat Marsden, unused to detection, nearly gave the game away.

"If you want him," she began, "he's——"

"Hell!" said Guy loudly, dropped his lighted cigarette onto the back of his other hand, and knocked Mr. Corkran's drink onto the floor. When the confusion had died down and the mess had been more or less put to rights, Topsy leaped in to cover Pat's embarrassed contrition. The latter was bright scarlet and on the verge of tears.

"My friend was going to say that she thinks Mr.

Higgins must be out," said Topsy quickly. "We were having a drink in the café after you'd gone, and she noticed the light in his window go out."

"Ah," said Mr. Corkran with a wink. "I see your friend's a smart girl. Keeps her eyes open." And he would have poked Patricia in the ribs if Bannister had not intervened with the inevitable "And now, Mr. Corkran, what's yours?"

"A pink gin," said that worthy. "I picked up the habit through knowing a lot of chaps in the navy, and I can't get over it." When the drink was brought, he swallowed it at a gulp. "Well, I must be toddling. Good-night, all. Glad to have met you again. See you here again one night soon, I hope."

"Thank God he's gone!" said Bannister heartily.

"That's all very well," said Topsy, who had turned back to the partition. "But so's Higgins. We'd better beat it quick."

They beat it so quickly as to arouse unworthy suspicions in the mind of the barman that they were trying to leave without paying. But Guy, in the best manner of fiction, hurled a ten-shilling note onto the counter and bade him keep the change. The barman stared after them as the swing doors closed.

"Not bilkers—simply blurry fools!" he observed to no one in particular, scratching his head and automatically mopping the counter. . . .

Out in Gentile Street it was now very dark. The moon was entirely obscured by thick black clouds, promising rain. The wind had dropped. Hardly any of the windows showed lights, and the garish brilliance of the café bar stood out like an oasis of noise and light in the silence and darkness of the narrow street.

Higgins had got a good start of his pursuers by making his retreat under cover of Mr. Corkran's tiresome geniality. He was a good fifty yards away when Bannister and the girls emerged from the private bar of the Blue Unicorn, and his paces, though uneven, were fast. They watched him stagger rather than walk across the little patches of light from the lampposts, and they moved steadily in pursuit.

Suddenly Guy pulled up.

"Steady, you two," he said. "It's ten bob to a tanner he's going back to No. 17, so we needn't rush things. Look here, Topsy, are my eyes playing tricks, or is that someone following him?"

All three stood staring through the murk.

"There's someone there, all right," said Pat, screwing up her eyes.

"You're right, darling," said Topsy. "But it's probably only Guy's little friend Corkran, or a stranger."

"I don't think so," said Guy. "Why is he keeping right up to the railings like that? He's not tight—he's walking too steadily for that, and unless I'm very much mistaken, he's not walking on his heels at all. You may be right, Topsy, in thinking it's Corkran, but I wonder what the devil he's after Higgins for, if it is."

"Let's go on," said Pat, tugging at his sleeve.

They went on accordingly, once more adopting the rôles of three bright young people of the lower classes "out on the bend." But the chase was not to last much longer. With a final lurch, Higgins disappeared into

No. 17. His immediate follower, whether Corkran or not, moved over to the other side of the street and apparently gave the lie to their suspicions by walking on steadily until he was out of sight. Bannister, Topsy, and Pat stopped in Mr. J. Carter's doorway and looked at one another.

"What now?" asked Pat.

And as if in slightly sinister answer to that question, the door, which had slammed behind Higgins, slowly opened.

Automatically they drew back, but no one and nothing came out, except a strong smell of vegetables no longer fresh. It was clear that the door had been on the latch, which had not properly clicked home.

"Well, I think," said Guy, "that you two girls ought to cut off home and I go up and interview Mr. Higgins."

Topsy made a most inelegant grimace at him.

"If it mightn't give the show away, I'd laugh," she observed. "What do you take us for? The Girls of St. Chad's, or a couple of aunts from the Children's Hour? You go first, and we'll follow to pick up the pieces."

"Yes, that's all very well," said Bannister, "but if he's drunk, there may be a rough house."

"Rough nothing!" said Topsy. "He'll be glad of a nice girl's hand to soothe his fevered brow."

"Bar rotting, Guy, we aren't going home," said Pat. "How could we? We've helped you do the dirty work, and now we want to see the fun."

For a moment Bannister hesitated. He pushed his spectacles higher up his nose with his thumb, put his pipe in his pocket, and shoved the door of No. 17 wide open, revealing a dingy hall, with scrofulous matting, a dilapidated hatstand, and a flight of narrow stairs at the far end, faintly illumined by a night light.

"All right," he said. "Have it your own way. But don't follow me too close, and if there's a row I'd be grateful if you didn't imitate the pictures. Don't stand about watching in picturesque attitudes, or try to get into it yourselves. Nip out and call in a policeman!"

"O.K., Chief!" said Topsy Levine. "Let's get going!"

So with Bannister leading, Topsy at his elbow, and Pat Marsden bringing up the rear, they tiptoed up three flights of bare uncarpeted stairs. After the first landing there was no light of any kind, apart from patches of grey indeterminateness which marked a couple of stairway windows and seemed only to intensify the general blackness. The stairs creaked abominably, the reek of stale greengrocery was almost overpowering, and from behind closed doors on the first and second floors sounded the voluptuous snorings of the Carter family.

At last they reached the top of the third flight and found themselves faced by a short passage and a closed door, under which shone a thin ray of golden light. Bannister looked round. The girls were standing close behind him, holding each other's hands and breathing rather quickly. What should he do next? Burst in or knock? And whichever he did, what was he going to ask Higgins? Mentally, he abused himself for a precipitate ass because he had not thought out properly the ultimate implications of his shadowing and his pursuit of the studio attendant. But something had obviously got to be done if he was not to cut an altogether ridiculous figure in the eyes of the two girls, and in particular in the eyes of Patricia Marsden. . . .

What actually happened was that his mind was made up for him by an outside circumstance. That circumstance was the distinct sound of feet on the lower flights of stairs. Pat tugged at his coat.

"Listen!" she said urgently.

"I know," said Guy. "It's no use our trying to get out of the way. There isn't cover for a rat anywhere on the staircase or landings. Besides, this may be friend Corkran after Higgins, in which case I want to be there. Come on. We're going in. Damn the odds!"

He marched boldly forward, and the girls followed. Now that they were no longer on tiptoe, their high heels made an incredible clatter on the bare boards of the staircase and passage. Bannister raised his hand to knock at the door, and as he did so the light that showed from under it vanished, and almost simultaneously came the crash of a revolver shot fired at close range.

Pat and Topsy screamed.

Bannister flung the door open, and from behind them came the sound of footsteps pounding up the staircase. . . .

"Come in," said Guy in a strangled voice. "But don't look."

The girls obeyed and stood together against the wall just inside the door, their faces white under their make-up. The room seemed full of smoke and the acrid smell of gunpowder. It contained nothing but a camp bed, a small wooden table and chair, a dilapidated washstand, and a chest of drawers. So much was visible in the pallid ghostly light of the moon, which had chosen that moment to break out between the lowering clouds and to reveal also the body of a man wearing only a shirt and trousers, which had pitched head foremost into the empty grate.

It was Higgins.

He was hideously shot through the side of the head and lay in a pool of blood with a heavy revolver gleaming dully beside him.

"Keep looking out of that window, you two," said Bannister. "We've got to see who's coming upstairs." And with a shaking hand he lit the two candles on the mantelpiece, which Higgins must have blown out a moment before the shot was fired which killed him.

As the candles flared up, sending the shadows dancing eerily about the room, the footsteps, now clearly recognizable as being those of two people, came along the passage and stopped.

"Come in," shouted Bannister, "for God's sake! Who are you?"

And then he cursed himself for a fool; for the two men who entered were Alf Corkran and the thin-faced foxy little man against whom he had bumped in the shop below that same morning.

Mr. Corkran gave one practised glance round the room.

"Thought as much, Ring," he said. "Couldn't be helped, though. Don't see how we could have stopped him, do you?"

The foxy little man shook his head.

"I think you might have kept off our 'manor,' Mr. Bannister," said Mr. Corkran. "This is no place for ladies," he added.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Guy.

"We were watching Higgins," said Mr. Corkran. "We're detectives from Scotland Yard, detailed for work at the moment under Detective Inspector Spears. Go and telephone him, Ring, will you? I'll look after things here. Well, it looks like the end of the case."

"Sorry, you two," said Bannister. "Afraid I've given you rather a dreary evening for nothing. Cut along! I'll meet you downstairs. I suppose I owe you an apology, too, Corkran."

"Thought we'd forgotten Higgins, and that you'd do that part of the job for us?" enquired Detective Sergeant Corkran pleasantly.

"More or less," muttered Guy. "I say, what's that?" And he took a step towards the mantelpiece, where something white stood between the candles.

But Corkran was too quick for him. He twitched the piece of paper away before Bannister could get his fingers on it, and slipped it into his pocket.

"I'll keep this for Inspector Spears, if you don't mind, sir. Bound to be a confession, though. I expect the ladies will be waiting for you downstairs, Mr. Bannister. They'll be needing an escort in Gentile Street at this time of night."

For a moment Bannister glared at the detective angrily. Then, realizing that he had no case, he took the hint and descended the staircase slowly and gloomily.

"Cheer up," said Topsy, when he reached the bottom. "How could you tell that little beast Corkran was a policeman? He looks like a commercial traveller—the sort that travels in sponge bags! Come back to the flat and have a drink."

"Thanks. I will," said Guy.

And it must be admitted that he found considerable consolation in the way in which Patricia Marsden, who had been badly shaken by the climax of the night's events, snuggled affectionately against him in the taxi all the way back to Mecklenburgh Square.

CHAPTER XXII

LUNCH FOR TWO

JULIAN CAIRD had little appetite for his breakfast the next morning. The first thing he saw when he opened his *Daily Express* was the death of Higgins, reported under splash headlines. There were no details; the brief paragraph merely stated that the unfortunate studio attendant had been found shot through the head in his room in Gentile Street. But to Caird, as to Bannister, it seemed the end of the case. Presumably the inquest on Parsons would be followed by an inquest on Higgins. The verdict on the latter would be "Suicide while of unsound mind," and the ordinary routine of life in general and of broadcasting in particular would be speedily reëstablished.

This was the view he expressed to Rodney Fleming as they went together to give evidence at the inquest on Sidney Parsons. The latter proved skeptical.

"Too easy, Julian," he said. "Too easy altogether. Of course, if the police want a solution at any price, this gives them a convenient way out. But I don't believe that poor devil did it, any more than Leo did. Neither is a sensible solution psychologically, as your friend Stewart Evans would put it. He's a tiresome man, but he's right about one thing—if you're looking for a murderer, one of the first things to be considered is whether your suspects are the sort of people who would in any circumstances commit murder. Higgins was just the type to shoot himself—I presume he did shoot himself?—but I'll swear that he never strangled Sidney Parsons."

"Then who the devil did, Rodney?"

Fleming shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know, and so long as they don't pitch definitely on Leo, I don't particularly care. I'm not going to pretend much sorrow for Parsons; but if they hang Leo, or even arrest him, he won't put on my new play. And that's a very serious matter."

"You're incorrigible, Rodney!"

At which point they were interrupted by Guy Bannister, his hair more than usually untidy, his eyes gleaming with excitement behind his spectacles. He poured out the story of his previous night's adventure, omitting nothing except the irrelevant feature that he had remained at the flat in Mecklenburgh Square until nearly four o'clock in the morning, stiffening the shaken morale of Topsy Levine and Patricia Marsden. Especially of Patricia Marsden.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he concluded.

"I think," said Rodney Fleming, "that you're exceedingly fortunate, young man, not to find yourself under arrest. After all, supposing *you* murdered Parsons, that Higgins saw you, and that you shot him last night to stop him giving you away? What about that?"

For a moment Bannister looked startled. Then he grinned.

"Nothing doing. Luckily, I couldn't have murdered

Parsons even if I'd wanted to. I was in the effects studio all through the play, and there's the evidence of four of my effects boys to prove it. Besides, to be quite honest, I was making an ass of myself last night. The police were watching him a darned sight more efficiently than I was. They only slipped up for a minute when they let the girls and me get into No. 17 before them."

"Yes—you're safe," said Fleming. "I suppose it's certain that Higgins shot himself?"

Bannister looked round cautiously before replying.

"Well, I don't know," he said.

"What?" rapped out Caird.

"All right, Julian. Don't bite my head off. It's ten to one he did kill himself. He left some sort of message behind him on the mantelpiece, only the police got it before I could look at it. I expect it's a confession. But there's just one point which struck me as a bit queer. There were two windows to that room of Higgins'. It struck me as odd that one should be shut and curtained, and the other uncurtained and open."

"Really open?"

"As open as it could be."

"Did you point that out to the police?" said Fleming.

"No," admitted Bannister. "It didn't strike me as significant at the time. I was pretty upset, you know—especially with a couple of girls on my hands."

"That'll teach you not to try combining business with pleasure next time," said Fleming. "Did you look to see whether there was anything outside that window except a sheer drop to the street?"

"I'm afraid I didn't."

"Then you'd better take the first opportunity to go back and find out that extremely important point. Well, here we are, Julian. Are you going to sit the whole thing through?"

"Not if I can get away," said Caird. "My office work's going all to blazes. Suppose we meet for lunch?" He was not going to admit even to Fleming that his main reason for wanting to get away from the inquest at the first possible moment was to avoid having to watch Isabel Dryden's tortured face while her husband was being questioned. . . .

"Right," said Fleming. "Lunch it shall be. Let's make it the Bay Tree at half-past one, shall we?"

The Bay Tree, that celebrated restaurant so dear to the members of the theatrical profession, is situated in a small street off Leicester Square. Once the stage had ceased to be the preserve of rogues and vagabonds, and acting became an occupation eminently suitable for ladies and gentlemen, the demand naturally arose for a restaurant in which actors and actresses could obtain first-class food at rather less than first-class prices and enjoy the amenities of what was practically a mixed luncheon club, without having to pay a subscription or risk the perils of election. Not that actors and actresses were the Bay Tree's only clients; far from it. About fifty per cent of the regular clientele was composed of those members of the public who, not unreasonably, preferred to see a dozen theatrical stars for the price of quite a good lunch, rather than watch two or three for the price of stalls at a play which might or might not be good. . . .

The Bay Tree at lunchtime was, in short, a microcosm of theatrical London. Optimistic managers invited prospective backers; would-be playwrights invited pessimistic managers. The doorway was almost continuously impeded by the entrance of one promising young actress after another, who would pause just inside and look deliberately along the line of tables, presumably for her host, but actually to "register" her appearance with every manager who might be present, and any members of the public who might recognize her. Thespian gossip was retailed loudly from table to table with little or no regard for the comfort of the uninitiated at intervening tables. Various well-dressed and ladylike young gentlemen fluttered from one party to another, waving their hands a great deal, and kissing the fingertips of elderly actresses with self-conscious gallantry. But it was not necessary to lunch at the Bay Tree elaborately or in a noisy party. Manfred, its proprietor, appeared just as gratified to see you if you lunched alone on nothing more exciting than a chop and a glass of lager beer. So, while the stars twinkled, the gossip shrilled, the young ladies postured, and the young gentlemen gyrated, it was possible to observe a well-known dramatic critic, the editor of a theatrical paper, and the London representative of a big American film company sitting in splendid isolation and seemingly quite detached from the hubbub all round them.

Julian Caird arrived punctually and secured a table in the corner farthest from the door. He had not been kept long at the inquest, and his evidence had consisted solely of a repetition of what he had already told Spears at Scotland Yard. He sat down, ordered a cocktail, and wished heartily that he had had the sense to think of some other restaurant. For the Bay Tree was full of his acquaintances, and each one of them wanted to ask him about the inquest in general and Leopold Dryden in particular. One after another they drifted up, giving one excuse more unlikely than the last, talked casually of this and that, and at last proceeded shamelessly to satisfy their morbid curiosity. Never a particularly genial person, Caird had become positively offensive to two or three of his questioners by the time Fleming put in an appearance.

"Don't scowl so, Julian," said the latter. "Do you mean to say you haven't ordered me a cocktail?"

"Why on earth didn't we go somewhere else?" said Caird.

"I *must* come here regularly now," said Fleming airily. "The penalties of approaching fame. If I don't, no one will remember that I'm a playwright at all. Besides, it's about time I began to think about casting *Bolt from the Blue,* and this place is far better than any agency. There you are!" And he pointed across the room. "There's Sheila Courtenay—I didn't even know she was back from America. She'd be ideal for Priscilla."

"Oh, damn your play, Rodney! What happened at the inquest after I left? Did you stay to the end?"

"I would have, but I thought you'd be ramping for your lunch. You're so greedy, Julian. What have you ordered? Fried sole and lamb cutlets? Not very original, but it will serve. If it wouldn't look so damnably ostentatious, I'd stand us a bottle of champagne. I need it."

"But what *happened,* Rodney?"

"Oh, nothing much. It was all desperately formal. Myself, I don't believe the police have put down half their cards. But you know, Julian, Leo's behaving like a lunatic. I'm beginning to believe that either he's frightened about something else, or that he really did it. He pretended that he'd been too seedy that evening to remember anything accurately about it at all; and when he was asked why he went up to the seventh floor for fresh air instead of going outside the studio tower on the sixth floor, he said, 'I suppose I thought subconsciously it would be fresher higher up.' Well, I ask you!"

"How did Isabel stand it?" asked Caird.

Fleming started.

"Isabel? I hardly noticed. I didn't like to look at her too much. I didn't want to embarrass her. But she sat through it and, as far as I could see, never turned a hair. Leopold was doing all his stuff—jaw thrust out, upper lip stiffened, one eyebrow lifted—all his tricks. But I don't think he impressed the coroner a bit."

"And what about Higgins, Rodney? What did Spears say about that?"

"Practically nothing. And frankly, I don't understand that, Julian. If Higgins left a confession, surely Spears would have said so and the thing would have been cleared up on the spot."

Caird attacked his cutlets, which had just arrived.

"Well, I shall go down to Scotland Yard after lunch," he said, between mouthfuls, "and ask Spears about this Higgins business. It's absurd leaving us on tenterhooks like this. Look here, let's talk of something else, shall we? Everyone within thirty feet is straining his ears to hear what we're saying about the beastly business."

"You can't blame the poor brutes," said Fleming. "The stage is hard up for dirt at the moment. Hullo, what's that?"

A slim young man in a startling green suit, exaggeratedly waisted, with fawn-coloured hair brushed straight back from his forehead, a carved emerald ring on one little finger, and suède shoes, appeared in the doorway of the restaurant, brandishing a newspaper. He moved slowly down the line of tables, and behind him, as he walked, the hubbub of voices rose in a crescendo of amused excitement.

"What *is* the thing, Rodney?"

"Timothy Brabazon?" said Rodney Fleming. "He writes the gossip column for the *Daily*. Try and be polite—he'll come and speak to me."

"Ye gods!" muttered Julian. "I think you'd better order that champagne, after all."

"All right," said Fleming. "Well, Timothy?"

The young exquisite held out his paper with a malicious grin, which exposed rabbity teeth.

"I'm sorry about your play, Rodney," he drawled. "But I suppose this'll put the lid on it. I suppose Dryden's got an option? What *happens* to an option if the owner's hanged?"

"Not very amusing, Timothy," said Rodney Fleming.

"Not? Well, it amuses me to think of Leo Dryden in gaol. How he'll hate the absence of modern conveniences!"

Caird snatched at the paper.

"My God!" he said. "They've done it! 'Arrested as he was leaving after the inquest, but the Coroner's verdict was murder by some person or persons unknown.' The police *were* holding something back, Rodney."

"I'm glad I've managed to interest you, after all," said Timothy Brabazon.

"I don't think you know Julian Caird," said Fleming.

"Delighted," murmured Brabazon. "Oh, yes, of course. You were engaged in this business, too. How strange and amusing to broadcast plays! It must be an enthralling occupation. Well, I expect you're glad the mystery's cleared up. It wouldn't have looked well for the B.B.C. if one of their staff had turned out to have done it."

"Oh, dry up, Timothy!" said Fleming. "I don't see quite why you want to walk round the Bay Tree brandishing this rag, anyway. People will know soon enough."

"My dear Rodney," Brabazon's tone was pained, "I'd never seen the place look so flat and dull as when I came in. I had to do something, or Manfred might expect me to pay my account. And in any case, surely you'd have expected me to offer my sympathy on the misfortune to your play?"

"If you haven't any sympathy for Leopold Dryden, Mr. Brabazon," said Caird angrily, "I think you might spare a thought for his wife."

Brabazon raised his eyebrows.

"Little Isabel? I'm devoted to her. Why, she'll be inundated with messages of sympathy all the afternoon, after this. I can assure you, Mr. Caird, she won't lack consolation. She has many admirers, I know."

Caird half rose from the table, clenching his fists. Brabazon stepped back.

"Dear me, Rodney, what impetuous friends you have! If I've offended in any way, I apologize most earnestly." He turned away. "Of course," he said over his shoulder. "So stupid of me. I seem to remember hearing that Mr. Caird was one of those admirers." And he sauntered away, trailing an odour of expensive scent.

Caird glared after him, wishing not for the first time that he lived in a less civilized age.

Rodney Fleming put a hand on his sleeve.

"Here's the champagne," he said. "Pull yourself together, Julian. Murder was rather out of place in

Broadcasting House, but it's a sheer impossibility in the Bay Tree."

"Murder," growled Caird, still looking after Timothy Brabazon, "would be hopelessly inadequate. Have you ever looked up the details of drawing and quartering, Rodney? If not, you might. And then imagine the process applied to Mr. Brabazon. Why is that sort of creature allowed to live?"

Rodney Fleming sipped at his champagne.

"Modern society," he observed, "lives by its scavengers. You'll see. I'll bet you a fiver I get a paragraph to myself in the *Daily* on Sunday."

Caird got up.

"I'm sorry, Rodney," he said, "but I can't stand any more of this monkeyhouse. It makes me feel sick. I'm going to try and find Spears. Damn it, we can't leave things like this. We both know that, however bad appearances may be, Leo never did it. We've *got* to find out who did. Coming?"

"I think not. You'll do better alone—you're so much more becomingly serious. I shall continue to contemplate the mutability of human affairs, and incidentally I will pay for the lunch."

But Julian Caird had not bothered to wait for the end of the sentence.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE NOTE AND THE BLOTTING PAPER

BUT Caird did not go to Scotland Yard after all. Just as he was passing the National Portrait Gallery, he remembered that he was due for his weekly meeting with the director of programmes at half-past two and that, as far as he was concerned, amateur detection had to come second to his broadcasting duties. Accordingly he took a taxi and drove back to Broadcasting House.

He had hardly entered his office when his telephone bell rang twice sharply.

"Is that you, Caird?" enquired the voice of General Farquharson. "Would you mind coming down to my office immediately?"

"Of course, sir, but I have a meeting with the director of programmes in ten minutes."

"Then put it off, Caird, put it off!" said the controller testily and rang off.

When Caird reached the controller's office on the third floor, he found a curious little group assembled. The General was standing looking out of his window, fingering his moustache uneasily. At his desk sat Spears, with, facing him, Guy Bannister, very flushed, and a rather attractive, plump fair girl in a canteen overall, who was sobbing noisily into her handkerchief.

Caird paused awkwardly in the doorway.

"Come in, Caird, come in. Take a chair," said the General. "Inspector Spears wanted you to be present. I only hope this means that this dreadful business is nearly done with, and we can get back to our normal work. Incidentally, I should like both you and Bannister to understand clearly that I don't consider it your business to try and do the work of the police for them. You've got plenty to do here, and your duty is to the listening public. I should be glad if you wouldn't forget it."

Caird and Bannister looked at each other uneasily.

"All right, Inspector," the General went on. "If you want me, I shall be next door in the director-general's room."

He went out, and everybody except Spears drew a long breath of relief.

Spears leaned forward across the desk and spoke to the canteen girl.

"Your name's Effie Lurgan?" he asked, gently enough.

"Yes, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty and two months, sir."

"And you've been at Broadcasting House—how long?"

"Five months, sir."

"Now, don't cry," went on Spears persuasively. "You can take my word there's nothing to cry about.

No one's going to be hard on you. You haven't done anything wrong. All I want you to do is just to answer a few questions truthfully and carefully."

Effie Lurgan sniffed dismally.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, "but it's all so dreadful. You see, he was fond of me, sir, and I was fond of him, in a way, although, of course, nothing could come of it, him being married, though I know it was true that he wasn't living with his wife and that she treated him something terrible."

"Just a minute," said Spears. "You've got in your hand a farewell message that Higgins left for you last night. Would you mind reading it to me?"

The answer was a fresh burst of sobs.

"I couldn't—really I couldn't. *You* read it, sir, please." And the girl dropped a crumpled piece of dirty paper on the desk in front of the detective. It was an ordinary piece of lined copybook paper, folded across, with "Miss Effie Lurgan, Broadcasting House" written in pencil in block capitals on the outside.

Spears unfolded it and read:

"Effie,

This is just a line to wish you good-bye and to say as I am sorry for all the trouble and pain I have caused you, loving you all the time as I do. I can't stick it no longer. They keep following me about, and the noises won't stop in my head. Mabel keeps writing for money, but she's had all my savings and I can't send her no more. I'm not afraid of going out, but I don't want people to think as how I might have killed that Mr.

Parsons. You know, we had *arranged to meet that night, Effie, so please tell the police so, and let me go out with a clear name. I can't think of more to say, so will now draw to a close.*

"Joe."

To Caird this message from the dead, so inadequately phrased, seemed indescribably pathetic. Effie Lurgan went so white that he was afraid she would faint, and he got up hurriedly out of his chair and pushed it towards her.

"Now I don't want to trouble you more than I need, Effie," Spears went on. "But just tell me: 'Mabel' is his wife, is she?"

"Yes, sir. But I don't know where she lives. I don't know anything about her, except that she treated him badly."

Spears nodded.

"Now this appeal of his to you. Is it justified? You remember that, when I interviewed you before, you denied that there had been any arrangement between the two of you to meet that night?"

"I know. But you got me so scared I hardly knew what I was saying. Oh, I know you didn't mean it, but a girl like me isn't used to the police."

"But you'll tell me the truth now?" insisted Spears.

"Oh, yes, sir. Joe sent me down a note during the afternoon asking me to meet him in an office on the seventh floor. We'd met there before, you see, sir. He wanted to talk things over, though I hadn't any more to say to him, as I'd told him already. I was afraid of losing my job, sir, if it came out that I'd arranged to meet him again. It isn't easy to get jobs now, and I have my little sister to look after."

"I see," said Spears. "You've behaved very sensibly on the whole, Effie, and I hope that if you ever have to answer questions by the police again, you'll remember to tell the truth the first time and not be afraid."

Effie Lurgan looked up, wide-eyed, and nodded.

"Perhaps you'd like to have this back," said Spears, holding out Higgins's note.

"Oh, no, thank you!" said the girl, recoiling. "I want to forget all about it, please. Can I go now?"

"Very well," said Spears.

Bannister opened the door, and with a quick, shuddering glance over her shoulder, Effie Lurgan bolted out of the room.

There was a little silence, finally broken by Caird.

"Poor little beast!" he said. "They're not going to make her suffer for this, are they?"

"No, no," said Spears. "I've fixed all that. It wasn't surprising that she lost her nerve. Well, Mr. Bannister, I thought you'd like to be in at the death, as it were, after all your efforts. I ought to be pretty angry with you, but I don't think there's any real harm done, so I won't bother. Well, we aren't much further, are we?" He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back in his chair. "Higgins is let out, which means one suspect less, but that's all we get out of that. The note's genuine enough, and I'm sure that girl's telling the truth now."

"But are you sure Higgins shot himself?" said Bannister.

"Why not? Have you got another idea?"

"Oh, I know you're beginning to think me an interfering young ass," said Bannister. "But I can't help noticing things. Did your Corkran or Ring spot the fact that one of the windows in Higgins' garret was open last night, while the other was closed?"

Spears smiled.

"It's a pleasure to have you to work with, Mr. Bannister, in some ways. You ask all the right questions. Ring did notice it, but he also noticed that there's nothing outside it, above or below, that a cat could stand on, let alone a potential murderer. And there's another thing: it'd be drawing the long bow of coincidence a bit too far for someone to have turned up on Higgins' windowsill and shot him through the head just as he finished writing a note like this." He tapped the bit of paper with his forefinger. "No, that doesn't happen in real life, Mr. Bannister. Higgins shot himself, all right. Ring and Corkran made only one mistake, and it was rather a bad one. They didn't follow Higgins sufficiently closely when he bought the revolver. If they had, they could have pulled him in for possession of a firearm without a license, and we would have saved his life."

"Do you honestly think it was worth saving?" interrupted Caird. "You can't do much for a chap when he's got into that state. He's just one more war victim—the sort who get neither recognition nor sympathy. I know what I want to ask you—why have you gaoled

Leopold Dryden? But I don't suppose you'll tell me."

"I don't mind," said Spears whimsically, "so long as you and Mr. Bannister will promise to keep it to yourselves. I have three reasons. The first is that somebody practically *had* to be arrested; the second, that there's a great deal of unpleasant evidence against Mr. Dryden; and the third is that I hope that, now he's arrested, he'll realize that he's got to open his mouth and answer questions. And if *he* won't, perhaps his wife will. There's a wall of silence covering those two, Caird, and it's got to be broken down somehow. If this doesn't break it down, I shall begin to believe that my instinct is wrong."

"Then, privately, you don't believe that Leo is guilty?"

"I do not. But my belief's got nothing to do with it either way. If you're a friend of Mrs. Dryden's, Caird, as I believe you are, I'd recommend you to advise her to use all her influence on her husband to get him to talk, and when he talks, to tell the truth. I don't want to scare her, but you can tell her from me that I've known men hanged on a darned sight less evidence than there is against Leopold Dryden at this minute."

"I'll do what I can," said Caird. "In fact, I was to dine with her tonight, but of course, now that Leo's in gaol, I was going to put myself off. Perhaps in the circumstances I'd better go. Rodney Fleming was coming, too, and he's known her longer than I have. I'll see if I can get him to put in a word."

"If you succeed, you'll be helping both me and the

Drydens," said Spears. "Well, I think that's all for the moment."

But Guy Bannister, who had been wandering restlessly up and down, looking at the uninspiring backs of the controller's collection of bound volumes of the *Radio Times,* suddenly turned round.

"I say," he said.

Spears laughed outright.

"Not *another* idea, surely, Mr. Bannister?"

"I don't care if you do pull my leg," Guy went on. "But I want you to listen to me a minute. It may seem a rotten thing to say about a chap who's a colleague of one's own, but have you thought at all about Stewart Evans?"

Spears and Caird exchanged glances.

"Just a bit," said the former.

"No—but seriously. After all, what was he doing in Broadcasting House the night of the murder? He could surely have done his work on *As You Like It* in his own flat. And what was he doing with those gloves of Dryden's which he gave to you? I know what he told you, but suppose what he was really doing was getting the gloves in order to destroy them—to destroy them because he had used them himself? Why's he trying so hard to pin the thing onto Dryden? Besides, Julian, you know his head's stuffed full of criminology, and—as we're being frank—everyone here loathes the sight of him!"

"Steady, Guy. All this is perfectly true, but none of it's proof, and it's proof we've got to be specially careful about, when, as you say, we don't like Evans."

"Like!" snorted Guy. "Disagreeable brute!"

"But anyway," Caird went on, "I know that the inspector's got his eye on Evans, even if it isn't quite the jaundiced eye that you and I would like him to have."

"Well, most of my ideas seem to be pretty stale before I can get them out," said Bannister, groping frantically in an inner pocket. "But I've got here something that you don't know about, and can't know about. I suppose I ought to have shown it to you before, but there's been so much doing, what with Higgins and all the rest of it. I tucked it away in my pocketbook and forgot it until we started talking about Evans in here. Look here, Inspector," and he put down on the desk and unfolded a large piece of white blotting paper that had obviously seen considerable use.

"Well?" asked the detective. "I suppose this means we've got to go and find a mirror. I see your General's a Spartan—he hasn't got one in his office."

"Mirror?" repeated Bannister.

"To read the letter that was blotted on this piece of blotting paper," Spears went on. "Where did it come from, by the way?"

"Mirror—bosh!" said Bannister rudely. "I'm not going in for that fool penny-dreadful stuff! This comes from the blotting pad in Stewart Evans' office."

"But what the devil," enquired Caird, not unnaturally, "are you doing with it?"

"Because," said Guy desperately, "I had my ideas about Evans from the first moment I heard of the murder and knew he was in Broadcasting House the same night. I went up to his office just on chance, to see whether I could put my hand on anything. Naturally, I looked at his blotting pad—now look in that corner, Inspector!"

Inside a pencilled square, and written in a neat, almost microscopic handwriting, Caird and Spears read: "S. Parsons, 93 Lupus Street, Pimlico." And below the address: "Mean, cruel, undersized, hard to handle."

"What about that?" Bannister concluded excitedly. "Doesn't that point to some connection between Evans and Parsons? *Doesnt* it?"

"Perhaps," said Spears. "Thank you, Mr. Bannister. It gives me an idea, anyway."

Julian Caird stood up.

"I'm sorry to pour cold water, Guy, but I think you're barking up another wrong tree. Why shouldn't Evans make a note on his blotting paper about Parsons' capabilities as a radio actor? I don't suppose he made it on the night of the murder at all. In fact, I'm sure he didn't, as he didn't hear the play. This is simply a note of his impression of Parsons' performance from listening to a rehearsal, and he put down the address in case he wanted that type for a part in one of his own productions. You'll probably find that he transferred it verbatim to his files. I've done that sort of thing myself, hundreds of times, about an actor whose work I don't know."

"Damn!" said Bannister. "Sorry, Inspector. I've sold you another pup."

"Don't apologize," said Spears. "As I said, you've given me an idea."

At that moment the door of the office reopened, and the General returned.

"Are you nearly through, Inspector?" he said.

"Very nearly, sir. You remember my asking you if I could have that piece of blattnerphone—I think you called it—tape sealed up and kept for me?"

"Certainly," said the General. "The house superintendent has got it under lock and key."

"Could it be arranged for me to hear it played through again sometime during the next day or two? There's no hurry—quite at everybody's convenience."

"I'll arrange it, and let you know the time at Scotland Yard," said the controller. "I don't wish to appear inquisitive, but is any real progress being made?"

"I think," said Spears grimly, "we're just beginning to get on."

CHAPTER XXIV

DIFFICULTIES OF A DETECTIVE

In spite of his optimistic words to the controller, Spears was a tired and exasperated man by the time he reached home for a belated supper. Seldom before, he thought, had the sitting room of his little Norwood villa appeared so thoroughly unattractive; never had cold ham, coffee, and his favourite cheese seemed so entirely unsatisfying. He waited in sulky silence, chewing an empty pipe, while the food was being got ready. He glowered while he ate it; and he violated an admirable custom of some years' standing by topping up with a whiskey and soda.

All this was sufficiently depressing to a devoted wife, especially as she had taken a good deal of trouble over the cheese and had for several days seen nothing of Simon Spears between eight o'clock in the morning and nine o'clock at night. However, being a sensible woman, she asked no questions, attended to his bodily needs, ignored his sulkiness, and waited for him to break his silence in his own good time. She had been married to Simon for three years and, unlike the majority of women, knew how to profit by her experience. . . .

At last Spears finished his whiskey. As he did so, he noticed that his slippers had miraculously put in an appearance and were standing by the fender conveniently within arm's length. He unlaced his shoes, replaced them with the slippers, leaned back in his chair, and grinned feebly.

"Sorry for being such a bear, Madge," he said. "But things aren't going too well."

"Not?" Madge Spears pulled up another chair and sat down placidly to the knitting of an emerald-green jumper—a colour which she knew Spears favoured.

"No," Spears went on. "I thought things were moving when we got the Higgins part of the business settled up after lunch, and Dryden under lock and key in the morning. But I don't think that really we've advanced a yard. There's a good case against Dryden from the point of view of opportunity, and it's reinforced by his refusal to give any account of himself. But it's motive that I'm looking for all the time—motive. And I can't find it."

"But what about those letters from Mrs. Dryden that were found on Parsons?" Madge enquired. "You say they proved Parsons was blackmailing her, and you as good as got her to admit that she quarrelled with her husband on that very point at dinner before the transmission of the play. Surely that's a good enough motive for anyone?"

"On the face of it, yes," said Spears. "It holds water until you look into it. But do you mean to say that if Dryden had killed Parsons for blackmailing his wife, he would have left letters proving that blackmailing in Parsons' pocketbook? Oh, I know murderers always make mistakes, but that was the one mistake Dryden wouldn't have made, if he'd been guilty."

"He wouldn't have had much time to avoid making mistakes," said Madge, "to judge from what you've told me. According to you, the whole thing was done in about a minute and a half."

"I know," Spears agreed. "But there's something in my bones that tells me that Dryden's not guilty. Unless, of course, he merely meant to give Parsons a hiding, and killed him by mistake. But if that was so, why on earth choose that place and time? It isn't sense."

"No murder's sense, dear, if it comes to that." The knitting needles clicked steadily for about a minute, and then Madge looked up. "Simon, what makes you so sure that it must have been one of those three or four people who actually did the killing? What about the rest of the cast? What about all the other people in Broadcasting House that night—engineers, and so on? You haven't forgotten that with the studio attendant absent from the door into the tower which he was supposed to be watching, anyone could have got along that passage on the seventh floor and into the studio?"

"I'd thought of that," said Spears. "It's *possible,* but it's only possible if you're prepared to admit the most extraordinary length of coincidence. In the first place, you can leave the other members of the cast out of it. There's any amount of evidence to prove that they were all in the various studios where they should have been during the period in which the crime was committed, and there's the same unshakable alibi evidence to cover the studio manager and the effects staff. So they're let out. Now let's take your suggestion that it might be someone outside altogether—even suppose it's this man Stewart Evans, whose activities want a good deal of explaining. I don't think you realize, Madge, the extraordinary delicacy of the machinery and time factors. How could anyone who wasn't intimately concerned with the production of the play know (a) where Parsons was; (b) that he was alone; (c) the particular moment at which he would be playing that particular scene, so that if he was murdered during it no one would notice anything out of the ordinary until the end of the play? All these things mean most careful timing and planning. I don't believe that an outsider, or any member of the Broadcasting House staff, could have fluked along that passage at the critical moment, and if he had, he would have been a lunatic to take such a risk. You don't want me, surely, to fall back on our last trench and put the thing down to an inexplicable burst of homicidal mania on the part of someone unknown?"

"But surely certain engineers would know all about a play like that?"

"Only the ones engaged on its actual transmission, and as they work in shifts, you don't even have the same engineers on duty for the transmission as you do at rehearsals. Besides," Spears went on, a little irritatedly, "I've checked up all that side of it, my dear. The movements of all the engineers in the main control room are accounted for, and it's so close to the dramatic control-panel room that the engineer on duty in there had no time to do anything but his actual job. That's to say, to go from the D.C. room into the engineers' control room to question them about the failure of the return lights, and come back again. Hancock knows when he left the D.C. room. His arrival in the engineers' control room was logged, and he was back in the D.C. room before Parsons had started his soliloquy. There's nothing on him."

"It is difficult, Simon."

"It's more than difficult—it's damnable! It'd have been bad enough if it hadn't been for these various 'accidents' that complicate it so tiresomely. If the return light hadn't failed, we could eliminate Julian Caird. Mark you, I don't see how he could have arranged for that light to fail without the orchestral conductor in 8A being his accomplice. But the fact remains that he was away from the D.C. room over the critical period, and there's no one to corroborate his story that he came straight back after seeing Dryden and Fleming on his return from 6A. Then there's Fleming. His yarn sounded thin enough, God knows, but it's cast iron, unless he made an accomplice of one of the girls on the telephone switchboard, which reminds me, incidentally, that I must send someone to Leeds tomorrow to check up the other end of that telephone call. And then Dryden. His story's the thinnest of all in a way—going out of the studio for fresh air, and up a flight of stairs needlessly, into the bargain. But that it is so, this almost convinces me: surely, if he was guilty, he would have thought of a better story than that? Or did he take a chance that he wouldn't meet anyone on the seventh floor at all? It seems an insanely long shot to me."

"But what about his gloves?" asked Madge, who wanted her husband to go on talking, and thereby get his present discontents out of his system.

"Those gloves," said Spears, "may mean anything or precisely nothing. Dryden gives no explanation of them, except that, two rehearsals before the transmission of the play, he mislaid a pair of gloves. That's possible enough. In fact, Caird goes so far as to say that he thinks he remembers Dryden saying something to him about it. But then Caird wants to do his best for him. Anyway, there's been too much fuss about those gloves altogether. They may not even have been used to strangle Parsons at all. Suppose the murderer used his own gloves and put Dryden's in that cupboard to draw a red herring?"

"Didn't you say they were exceptionally small gloves for a man?" said Madge.

"You mean they might have been used by a woman? That's a notion I hadn't thought of, my dear. It's ingenious, but I'm afraid it doesn't hold water. All the women in the case are accounted for."

"Including Mrs. Dryden? If she was being blackmailed, she had a real motive."

"She wasn't out of Macdonald's sight all through the play. There's motive there, but not opportunity, Madge. That won't wash. Besides, I doubt if any woman would be strong enough. The killing was done very quickly, remember. Whoever did it must have had powerful hands, however small they were."

"You've never said any more," Madge began again, after a little pause, "about that watch ticking that Mr. Bannister drew your attention to when you heard that steel-tape recording played through."

"That doesn't mean I haven't *thought* a lot about it. I think it's clear enough how it got there. I was careful to get, from Caird, Parsons' exact position during his soliloquy. As it was being said in a low, subdued tone of voice, Parsons was placed within about a foot of the microphone. What I conceive to have happened is this: he was caught from behind by the murderer, who put his left hand over Parsons' mouth and simultaneously took him by the throat with his right. It was during the first few seconds, while his left hand was across Parsons' mouth and the microphone, that the ticking of the watch was heard. Then, no doubt, the left hand was shifted down to join the other at Parsons' throat, and, as the murderer slowly choked him, to help lower the body silently to the floor of the studio."

"It couldn't have been Parsons' watch?"

"It could not; he wasn't wearing one. Unfortunately Leopold Dryden, Julian Caird, Rodney Fleming, and Stewart Evans all wear wrist watches and were wearing them that night, and in spite of everything Guy Bannister may say, I don't believe you can tell one wrist watch from another by means of its tick through the microphone."

"Bother!" said Madge. "I've dropped a stitch. Would the murderer know that?"

"Know what?"

"That the ticking of different wrist watches would sound just the same. Suppose you staged a test?"

"By Jove!" said Spears. "There may be something in that. In fact, now I remember it, Rodney Fleming suggested something of the sort—at least, I think he did. Madge, that's a notion. Something might come of it. But it wants staging, though."

"You'll see, dear," said his wife placidly, "it'll work out. You've still got plenty of loose ends to follow up. It isn't as if you were against a blank wall."

"I know. If only they'd give me time and not badger me so much," said Spears bitterly. "Cavendish was at me again this afternoon. After practically giving me the hint to arrest Dryden, he now says he thinks it was precipitate. I didn't understand what he was getting at until I saw the evening papers. It's a perfect curse that Scotland Yard's so much in the news. What with the police reforms on the one hand and the news value of Broadcasting House on the other, work on this case is like doing a job under about eighty searchlights. Besides, the amateurs are beginning to take a hand."

"What, Mr. Caird and Mr. Bannister? Are they doing much harm?"

Spears smiled. "I don't mean them—they're all right. They only reach, about a day later, the conclusions I have already achieved. It amuses them and it doesn't hurt me. But as the assistant commissioner said, everyone who was listening to that blasted play has got some theory of how the crime was committed. Even Cavendish is right sometimes. There was a pile of letters like a film star's mail at the Yard this morning, and another at the B. B. C. The editor of the *Radio Times* had a third, which he sent down to me by special messenger."

"Aren't any of them helpful, Simon?"

"My dear Madge, have you ever read representative letters as written to public institutions like the police or Broadcasting House? Several suggested that Parsons strangled himself; two that the murderer was hidden in the ventilating plant; a third solemnly puts forward the suggestion that he had been electrocuted by some diabolical device of Julian Caird's from the D. C. panel. And as for the things they say they heard! Apparently there was everything in 7C that evening from a buck nigger—an old lady who'd lived in Jamaica wrote to say that she recognized his typical stertorous breathing!—to a woman with false teeth which didn't fit properly. That was the theory of a dentist in Hull. The only intelligent suggestion came from a retired colonel at Bath, who wrote to ask if we had considered the possibility that the murderer had killed Parsons earlier than we thought and had played his scene for him, imitating his voice. Of course, that is a possibility, and if it was a fact, we should have to start all over again and reconsider all the various alibis. If Parsons was killed earlier, it would let Caird out. He would have been in the D. C. room. It would wreck Fleming's alibi altogether; and it would probably let Dryden out, though he was moving from one studio to another at different times during the course of the play, unlike the majority of the cast—we should have to go into that very carefully, to be sure."

"Do you think that's honestly possible, Simon?"

"I don't know, Madge. But as I see it, I am bound to take the word of the people who knew Parsons' voice, and who heard the scene. If it hadn't been for the blattnerphone record, it would have been a nice point, with Caird away from the panel room. I should have had to rely entirely on Hancock's opinion. But with the blattnerphone, it's different. Caird, Fleming, Macdonald, Bannister, and Hancock all agree that it's Parsons' voice, and there's no doubt about it, it isn't a voice that could be easily imitated by anybody. In fact, it's just the sort of intelligent amateur suggestion that might well send us on an altogether false trail. Let's drop the thing, Madge. I shall have more than enough of it again tomorrow. Let's talk of something else. Julian Caird and Fleming are dining with Mrs. Dryden. Perhaps they may get her to persuade her husband to talk—if only he's got anything to say."

"All right, dear," said Madge. "Would you like some music?"

"If by that you mean the wireless," said Spears, "if you put on the infernal thing, I'll drink more whiskey, I warn you."

"It isn't really music," said Madge soothingly. "It's nearly midnight, so it'll be a dance band from that new restaurant they've just opened."

"I never want to hear the wireless again," said Spears. "Don't you dare to renew our license next year!"

"Just as you like, dear. Well, I expect you've got to be up early again in the morning. Suppose we make a long night of it, and go to bed now?"

"Quite a good idea," said Spears. "I'll just put away the whiskey."

He took up the bottle and went out into the narrow hall.

As he did so, the front door bell rang vigorously. He opened it and found himself facing a hatless young man in evening clothes. It was Julian Caird, breathing hard and with a queer distorted expression on his face.

"Hullo, Caird! What's the matter?"

"May I come in and sit down for a minute, Spears? I thought I'd better come and see you at once. Someone's just tried to put me under a train!"

"Put you under a train?" said Spears, shutting the door behind him. "Who?"

"Stewart Evans," said Caird savagely.

"Are you serious?" said Spears, reopening the sitting-room door. "Go in and sit down. I don't think you know my wife. Oh, Madge, this is Mr. Caird."

Spears was just about to follow his unexpected guest, when suddenly the telephone rang sharply.

"Hullo," said Spears. "Yes?"

"Are you Inspector Spears?" enquired the voice at the other end.

"I am," said Spears. "Why?"

"I thought perhaps," said the voice, "it might interest you to know that an attempt has just been made on my life. Perhaps you would care to come and talk over the details with me tomorrow morning at Broadcasting House?"

"Broadcasting House?" stammered Spears. "Who are you?"

"Stewart Evans," said the voice and rang off, leaving Spears staring bewilderedly from the instrument to the open door of his sitting room, through which came the pleasant tones of his wife's voice making herself agreeable to Julian Caird.

CHAPTER XXV

DINNER WITH ISABEL

JULIAN CAIRD had not been looking forward to his dinner that evening with any degree either of pleasure or satisfaction, and in spite of the encouragement he had received from Spears to keep the engagement, he was still in two minds as to whether he would not put himself off at the last moment, when he met Fleming at the club in Brook Street to which they both belonged.

He found Fleming in the empty billiard room, attempting elaborate experimental cannons and consoling himself for his continual failures with a pint of draught cider. It was then about six o'clock, and they were due at Isabel's at half-past seven.

"Hullo, Julian. We've just got time for a quick fifty before we push off."

Caird grunted and chose a cue with care from the rack on the wall.

"You break, Rodney," he said, taking off his coat. "Look here, do you think we ought to go?"

Fleming just failed to achieve a double baulk with his opening shot.

"Go? Why not? Delicacy's all very well, Julian, but it can't be very amusing for Isabel to be sitting there all by herself, imagining what Leo looks like in durance vile. You and I know the sort of way he'll be going on, and so does she. He'll be striding up and down giving his celebrated impersonation of the noble martyr. Then at intervals he'll realize that he's got no audience worth speaking of, and he'll give a dreary exhibition of rather ill-bred bad temper. It's a bore when tiresome people get into trouble; it's so difficult to sympathize with them properly."

"But I thought you liked Leo, Rodney?"

"I'd like Beelzebub, if he'd put on one of my plays," said Fleming. "What will you drink?"

"Nothing, thanks. Don't you think honestly that she's bound to feel we're butting in——"

"Unwarrantable intrusion into a house of sorrow?" interrupted Fleming sarcastically. "My dear Julian, is it continual listening to news bulletins which fills your mind with these regrettable clichés? Now don't talk humbug. We'll go down and cheer her up. Ultimately I may even go so far as to play the piano to both of you. In short, we shall have a most successful evening." He potted the red smartly, went in off the white, failed to do it again, and retired to the mantelpiece to finish his cider.

Caird miscued, swore, and put the cue back in the rack.

"It's no good, Rodney," he said. "I can't play. This infernal business is getting properly on my nerves. If it isn't cleared up soon, I shall start suspecting you, or believing I did it myself without knowing it."

"Then have a drink, my dear fellow."

"It's all very well for you, Rodney, but it isn't at your elbow all day long. I can't begin to tell you what the office is like—everyone bursting with curiosity, and no one saying a word in case it's bad form. As a matter of fact, the authorities have handled the thing with extreme discretion. In spite of all the nonsense that's talked on the subject, I think there's a good deal to be said for the common-sense military point of view in a crisis. But you can't help human nature, and of course my own people are the worst of the lot. You can imagine how the effects boys and stenographers are taking it. I'm beginning to get used to being looked at rather curiously as a hypothetical murderer, but I can't reconcile myself to the amount of bad work that's being done as a consequence. Hancock was on the panel for a rehearsal this afternoon and made mistakes solemnly for three quarters of an hour. Guy's almost forgotten what effects are for, and if I want to speak to Stewart Evans, I have to send for him officially. Damn the whole business, I say! But who do you really think did it, Rodney?"

"My dear Julian, how do you expect me to answer that? I don't suppose you expect me to incriminate either myself or you. Who remain? Dryden and Evans. Neither you nor I believe it was Leopold, and I can't see any definite proof against Evans whatsoever. The mere fact that you dislike him intensely is probably in his favour. If only I'd seen him mouching along that seventh-floor corridor that night at some time or other—but I didn't. Besides, as your friend Spears would say, where's the motive? The only thing I thank God for is that we're not in America."

"Why?"

"Because if we were," grinned Fleming, "this is just the sort of case that would infallibly attract the attention of a man like Philo Vance, who would waste hours of our valuable time in explaining to us exactly how much he knew about frequencies and decibels from an intensive study of the technical wireless press. No, Julian, I see no solution. Unless it's another *Mystery of the Yellow Room,* and Spears did it, disguised as a microphone! Come on, let's go along to Isabel's and make her give us a cocktail. I'll tell 'em to call us a taxi."

In due course they reached the flat in Upper St. Martin's Lane, and Isabel answered the door herself.

"Come in," she said, with a forced cheerfulness. "But I'm afraid you've only got a cold dinner. Leo's manservant walked out on me as soon as he heard of the—arrest. Said he couldn't afford to be mixed up in that sort of thing—in his profession."

She laughed a little hysterically. "And I had to send Matilda out. She would come into my room and try to sympathize with me. So I made her lay the dinner and told her to go to the Empire."

Rodney Fleming put a soothing hand on her shoulder.

"Between us, Julian and I make the perfect domestic staff," he said. "I will begin by mixing a capital cocktail, if you can find me the shaker. Or would you rather we went out?"

Isabel shuddered, and Fleming wondered why it was that while some women's taste in clothes was stimulated visibly for the better by an emergency, Isabel's seemed entirely to have gone to pieces. Surely she was intelligent enough to realize that with very pale cheeks almost entirely without make-up, and darkly hollowed eyes, a black frock made one look ghastly. . . .

"Out?" she repeated. "I don't think I shall ever be able to go out again. And to think that I used to like people looking at me in restaurants, and knowing that they were whispering: 'That's Isabel Palmer—you know—the girl who married Leopold Dryden.' I couldn't cut the telephone off, in case the solicitors wanted to speak to me, and ever since lunch one kind friend after another has been on to me, pretending to be sympathetic and really only wanting to satisfy their odious curiosity. What nuisances people can be! I thought they liked Leo and me."

"Damn Timothy Brabazon!" muttered Caird.

"Who?" asked Isabel.

"One of the more unkind friends," said Fleming. "We saw him in the Bay Tree at lunch, having the time of his life. As you know, my dear, it's one of my principles to keep on good terms with the press, but Julian rushes in where angels fear, with his usual impetuosity, and was very rude to him—not that it did any good."

"Thank you all the same, Julian," said Isabel.

They drank Fleming's cocktail and sat down to their meal in silence.

"You know," Isabel went on suddenly, "I think I could bear all of it if it wasn't for the papers. Do you know I've had eight reporters trying to see me this afternoon? And then those awful bills and the shrieking headlines——" She broke off.

"Wouldn't you rather talk about something else, Isabel?" said Fleming pleasantly.

"No," said the girl, "I think it helps rather to talk about it to people who understand."

Julian Caird took the bit between his teeth.

"All right," he said. "I'll take you at your word, Isabel. Look here, can't you make Leo talk? I'm sure —at least I'm practically sure—that the police would never have arrested him if it hadn't been that they hoped by doing so to compel him to break this stupid silence."

Isabel went whiter than ever.

"Yes, I know, Julian. But no one seems to be able to believe that Leo mightn't have anything to say. He's said all he can. He *was* ill that night. I know it was partly an attack of nerves, between the play and the row we had at dinner, but he was ill, all the same. He *did* go out of the studio for fresh air. That isn't so difficult to believe, surely?"

"But why on earth couldn't he have gone outside the tower on the sixth floor, instead of going up to the seventh?" said Caird irritably. "That's the thing that sticks."

"I know," said Isabel, helplessly. "It sounds absurd, but wouldn't your first instinct, if you were going out for air, be to go as high as you could? It isn't as if Leo knew the geography of that wretched building of yours backwards, as you do. The first thing he saw when he got outside the studio was that spiral staircase. It doesn't seem to me so impossible that he should have gone straight up it, and then out of the tower on the seventh floor." She put down her knife and fork and stared miserably in front of her. "What I can't bear," she said, "is that I know it's really my own fault. If I hadn't lost my head and shown Leo that blackmailing letter from Parsons, no one would have believed the possibility of his guilt for a second. And then I lost my head again and lied about it, when everybody knows that Leo is inclined to be rather absurdly jealous—I know it looks bad, but neither of *you* believes that he did it, do you?"

"Of course not," said Caird.

"Not for a moment," said Fleming. "Do you know," he went on, "I don't think that suspicion would have focused itself on Leo as it did if he hadn't been so stupid when he was first questioned, on the night of the murder. Why did he try the Archangel Gabriel stuff?"

"You know what Leo is, Rodney. He can't help being a little bit spoiled, like all successful actors. Besides, he was feeling rotten, and wanted to get home———"

"Look here, Isabel," said Fleming, "I suppose he didn't shut up like a trap because he thought *you* might be concerned?"

"Rodney!"

"Of course, he wouldn't tell you that. But mightn't it have been so? Could you have been out of the studio at the same time as he was?"

"I could," said Isabel unsteadily. "But he had only to ask Mr. Macdonald—*he* knew that I wasn't out of the studio the whole evening."

"But don't you see," cried Caird, "that if he had asked Macdonald, and you had been, he would have drawn suspicion immediately upon you! Perhaps he still thinks that that's the truth. When are you going to see him again?"

"Tomorrow, I hope, but he doesn't seem to want to see me much." Her lips quivered pathetically.

"That must be it," Caird went on. "That explains it. You can disabuse his mind of that notion, anyway. And when you've done so, he'd better explain to Spears that that was why he kept quiet."

"Yes," said Fleming, "I think that's sound."

"I'll do it, of course," said Isabel. "But I'm absolutely certain that the only way to make Leo safe is to find the real murderer. Julian, who *could* it have been? I know that I'd have killed that little brute Parsons myself gladly, if I'd been strong enough and clever enough to think of a way. But who else could have wanted to?"

"If he was a professional blackmailer," said Fleming, "I don't suppose you were his only victim. By the way, I shouldn't talk to the police about your having wanted to kill him, if I were you! They might assume that you'd talked like that to Leo, and that he'd acted on it."

"But Leo only said he'd thrash him, when I showed him the letter," said Isabel.

"I'm quite certain," said Fleming with a laugh, "that what he actually said was that he'd horsewhip him. Though personally I've never been able to understand how it's either easy or sensible to horsewhip anyone. A crop's much easier to use, and would, I imagine, be far more painful. Besides, has Leo got a horsewhip?"

"Oh, for God's sake be serious, Rodney!" said Caird. "Sometimes I get a beastly feeling in my bones that all the time you're trying to work out appropriate dialogue for using this thing as the plot for a play. It isn't human."

"I've thought of it," admitted Fleming. "But I don't think it would work out. Don't mind me, Isabel. It's only the nature of the beast. You know I'll do anything in the world for you, don't you? Come along, let's go into the drawing room, and I'll play the piano to you."

"Just one more thing," said Caird, "before we drop the subject. Rap me over the knuckles, Isabel, if I'm being impertinent, or anything, but did Leo have a row with one of my colleagues—a man called Stewart Evans?"

Isabel started. "Yes. Why?"

"Nothing particular, except that Evans is one of those people on the fringe of the case, whose activities want a bit more explaining than they've had. And it seems to me that, one way and another, he's doing his best to make people believe that Leo's guilty. What was the row about?"

To his surprise, Isabel sat down again and burst into tears.

"Drop it, Julian," said Fleming. "You're being an ass."

"That's all right, Julian," said the girl, dabbing at her eyes with an inadequate fragment of lace and chiffon. "But it's all so silly. I met Mr. Evans in Nigel Druce's dressing room at the Shaftesbury about eighteen months ago. He was very amiable and flattering, and I lunched with him two or three times, and so forth. And then he began to get a little tiresome—oh, nothing really, but you know what middle-aged men are like sometimes. So I thought it would be best to stop going out with him and have him here. I know you don't like each other, Julian, but he's extraordinarily interesting in some ways. He's been all over the world, and he talks extremely well."

"I know what you mean," said Caird.

"But you won't admit it? Well, anyway," Isabel went on, a little defiantly, "I liked seeing something of him now and then. He isn't a bit like most of the people I knew. He came here two or three times, and it was all right, but he wouldn't drop this absurd pretense he had established of being in love with me. Well, you know how Leo keeps up this pose of being extremely casual with me in front of other people. He's always done it—he says it isn't good form to be affectionate to your wife in public."

"The silly snob!" thought Fleming to himself. "And how typical!"

"Well, I suppose Mr. Evans chose to infer from that that we weren't happy together, or something. Anyway, he practically made open love to me one evening when Leo was in a particularly bad temper, and it ended in a ridiculous scene, and Leo forbidding him the flat."

"But they didn't come to blows, or anything?"

"Oh, no! Stewart would never fight. He says he has a particular horror of physical violence."

"I see," said Caird. "Sorry if I upset you."

"Oh, I wish you weren't on bad terms with him!" burst out Isabel, after a little pause.

"Why on earth?" asked Caird.

Isabel twisted her handkerchief desperately between her fingers.

"The second he heard of Leo's arrest, he rang me up," she said. "He rang me up three times this afternoon, and at last he said he was coming round this evening. I can't see him, Julian. It isn't fair when I'm feeling like this—when I'm tired and miserable and all on edge!"

Fleming and Caird exchanged glances.

"Now listen to me, Isabel," said the former decisively. "We'll see that you're not bothered. You and I are going into the drawing room, and you shall put your feet up on the sofa and I will play Chopin to you until you go to sleep. When the bell rings, Julian will answer the door, and he won't be the chap I take him for if Mr. Evans comes up that staircase tonight. What about it, Julian?"

"I'll deal with him," said Caird grimly. "You can count on me for that."

"But you won't do anything stupid?"

"There shan't be a second murder, if that's what you're afraid of, Isabel."

They left the dining room, but just as Rodney Fleming was opening the piano, the front-door bell rang.

Fleming struck three martial chords on the piano.

"Cue for entrance of hero to rescue oppressed heroine," he said lightly. "Run along and do your stuff, Julian."

The latter nodded, took up his hat, and went down the stairs, while Rodney Fleming covered his departure with the strains of an extremely lively mazurka. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

CAIRD *VERSUS* EVANS

ARRIVED at the bottom of the stairs, Caird drew a deep breath and opened the door. As he expected, he found himself facing Stewart Evans, an opera hat rather on the back of his head and his evening overcoat unbuttoned, which gave him a curiously raffish appearance.

"Hullo, Evans! Who'd have thought of meeting you here?" said Caird, assuming a cordiality which he emphatically did not feel, and taking a pace forward out of the doorway so that Evans had to step back to save his toes from being trodden on. Whereupon Caird took the opportunity to slam the door of the flat.

"Why do that?" said Evans angrily. "Couldn't you see I was paying a call on Mrs. Dryden? I imagine that's what you've been doing."

"I've been dining with her," said Caird coldly. "You know, Evans, I think it would be kind to leave her to herself this evening. Naturally, she's feeling the strain."

"What business is it of yours, Caird?"

"None, I admit, except that I'm leaving early for that specific reason."

"And you wish me to follow such an admirable example?"

"Oh, hang the example, Evans! It's a question of humanity and imagination, that's all."

"My dear Caird," said Evans patronizingly, "I'm some years older than you, and I flatter myself that I've seen a good deal more of the world. I think I can guarantee that Mrs. Dryden will appreciate a visit from me, even at a time when she finds your society a little——"

"That's enough!" snapped Caird. "I was trying to be reasonably amiable and give you a hint. If you won't take it, here's the truth: Mrs. Dryden doesn't want to see you. She sent me down to tell you as much. She's very tired, and she's going to bed early. Will that do?"

Evans moved forward aggressively, but Caird did not budge, and they remained standing ludicrously toe to toe, glaring into each other's eyes, far too angry to appreciate any humour in the situation. From the window overhead sounded the fierce exhilaration of Rodney Fleming's mazurka.

"Going to bed early," sneered Evans, "with that row going on? Do you take me for a perfect fool?"

With the light from an adjacent lamppost behind him, he appeared to Caird as an almost featureless grotesque silhouette, ugly and menacing. The glasses, the weakly, malicious fat features, the baldness, were all hidden; and it suddenly flashed into Caird's mind that the thing might come to a physical issue. He glanced rapidly up and down the street. It would hardly do for the papers to be able to add to their bag next day a paragraph about two B. B. C. officials brawling in a street in the West End. . . .

And almost at the thought, Evans hit out; a futile round-arm jab with the thumb inside the fingers of his right hand. Caird dodged, closed, and pinioned him by both his wrists.

"Don't be such a sanguinary fool," he said hoarsely. "We can't have a fight in the street like a couple of drunks!" And as Evans continued to struggle, he went on, "Drop it, I tell you. I know just enough ju-jutsu to break your wrist for you comfortably. Will you behave?"

For an instant he was afraid he might have to carry out his threat, but then he felt the other go limp in his hands, and he let him go. Evans almost collapsed. His hat fell off, and he stooped for it, groping clumsily, his glasses laughably askew, his breath coming in painful gasps.

"For two pins," he muttered, standing up again and putting his hat under his arm, "I'd give you in charge for assault."

"Oh, for God's sake," said Caird wearily. "Quite apart from the fact that you started it—look here, Evans, I'm sorry. Aren't we both making rather fools of ourselves? I know we're temperamentally antipathetic—we can't help that—but can't we call it quits and try and find some reasonable *modus vivendi?* We can't go on scrapping like this when, owing to circumstances, we've got to continue working together. The situation's becoming intolerable. Oh, I know that you think me arrogant and superior, just as I find you tiresome and difficult; but it's absurd for us to quarrel over Mrs. Dryden. After all, we're both friends of hers. I know she values your friendship—she told me so tonight; and the fact that she doesn't want to see you this evening is no reflection on you. Surely you can see that?"

During the short silence that followed, the mazurka stopped with a crash and was followed by the caressing melancholy of one of the Preludes. Evans shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"If she can put up with a party . . ." he began. "I'm not a pariah!"

Caird followed him and caught his arm. He could now see Evans's face, and it wore a twisted miserable expression as of a man ridden by nightmare.

"It isn't a party," said Caird. "It's only Rodney Fleming, and even if you don't like him, you must admit that he plays extremely well. After all, there's the best authority for falling back on music to drive out the devils of depression and anxiety. You remember David and Saul?"

Evans looked back over his shoulder at the lighted window.

"Fleming?" he repeated. "I wonder . . . All right, Caird, you win. I'll go quietly."

He tried to wrench his arm free, but Caird hung onto it firmly.

"Splendid," he said. "And we'll start a clean sheet —what do you say?"

"Yes—if you'll spare me the Kipling concomitants."

Caird laughed. "I'll spare you anything you like, but you must come along to the club and have a drink on it. Let's walk, shall we? It's no distance there, and it's a marvellous night."

Marvellous it certainly was, as, in a fine summer, a London night can be. The sky was powdered with stars, save where the moon, hanging in the blue darkness like a great Japanese lantern, flooded them out of existence. Against the sky the roofs made a pattern of irregular silhouettes that would have delighted René Clair; and even the electric lights outside the theatres and the sky signs in Piccadilly Circus seemed to have abandoned something of their quality of advertisement in exchange for an undeniable something that might, for once, not too fantastically, be termed magical.

It was during that walk that Caird, in spite of his natural intolerance and his ingrained personal antipathy for his companion, began to feel and understand some of the qualities of Stewart Evans which had been discerned in him by Isabel Dryden. Perhaps it was because Evans, for the first time, revealed himself to Caird unmasked, and that for the first time Caird began to see him for what he was: a man in many ways brilliant, much travelled, widely read, but fatally cursed by two things—an inferiority complex, which he owed largely to an overpowering sense of his physical deficiencies, and an almost total inability to suffer fools gladly. In a world so appreciative of face values and so largely composed of fools, a man could scarcely be more heavily handicapped. And so it had proved. For Evans had been bullied at his public school because he played games badly; encouraged to intellectual snobbery at his university because, while his work was brilliant, he was a bad "mixer"; for some years a private tutor, maintaining his appointments by his outstanding qualities as a teacher, though never achieving popularity either with his pupils or his employers. Barred from active service in the war by his sight, he had followed so many others into the civil service, going as an interpreter attached to various foreign missions in their dealings with the Ministry of Munitions. After the war, while most of his colleagues achieved permanent appointments from the professional friendships they had cultivated, Evans as usual found himself friendless and unwanted, and had drifted back into teaching, and thence to the B. B. C. To Caird it appeared a singularly moving story of capacity thwarted by personality, a combination of forces which he knew himself how to appreciate, though in his own case he had succeeded in toughening his skin, hardening his heart, and adopting a pose of vigorous aggressiveness.

It was nearly ten o'clock when they reached the club. The big room upstairs was almost empty. Caird ordered brandy-and-sodas and cheroots, and the strangely assorted pair sat in adjacent armchairs exchanging reminiscence and comparing personal experiences. But after a little the conversation turned on personal hobbies; on Caird's singular combination of cats and naval history, and Evans's medicine—he had at one time thought of becoming a doctor—and criminology. And from the last, inevitably, to the crime at Broadcasting House. Immediately Caird found his flow of sympathy dammed, for on this point Evans either would not, or could not, conceal the superiority and the satisfaction which he felt in the confirmation of his theory by the arrest of Leopold Dryden. He regarded the latter's guilt as assured, and accordingly spoke of the whole case now as dispassionately as if it were historical fact.

"It must be almost unique," he observed complacently, lighting a cigarette from the stump of his cheroot, "not so much from its incidentals as from its mixture of cunning and extreme stupidity. I think it was that first put me onto Dryden. There was considerable ingenuity in making use of Parsons' isolation in that studio and in the timing of the actual crime, just as there is considerable superficial brilliance about Dryden as an actor. You know, as well as I do, Caird, that he gets his effects almost entirely from his physical equipment—his appearance and his voice—and there's hardly any grey matter behind it at all. Just look at the murder. You'll find precisely the same thing. Superficial brilliance achieved by strangeness of setting and extraordinary complication of all kinds. But I tell you that the great crimes have been the simple crimes, and that the more complicated a murder appears, the simpler it is in the long run to solve. What's the easiest way of murdering anybody?"

"I've never thought about it," said Caird, glancing surreptitiously at his wrist watch and seeing that it was already eleven o'clock.

"Then think now," said Evans. "Suppose you want to do someone in, would you choose a place like Broadcasting House? Of course you wouldn't. The idea's grotesque. But suppose you're walking arm in arm with someone along the street, and just as a bus comes up behind you, you push him sideways and draw your arm clear. It may look a bit suspicious, but if you concealed your motive properly, and if you say you stumbled, no one could prove otherwise. That's a simple crime, and I bet you what you like it occurs far more often than you would like to imagine."

"Except," yawned Caird, "that the average bus driver's too careful to complete your crime for you. There aren't many people killed by buses every year, you know. And if your victim's not killed, then you're in the soup!"

"I don't say the motorbus is the ideal instrument," Evans admitted. "But what about the tube train? Suppose you stumble against someone on a platform just as the train comes in. There won't be much mistake about it then. That's what I call an intelligent murder—easy, safe, certain, and above all, simple. You've only got to think of one thing—concealment of motive."

"I expect you're right. Shall we go? We seem to be the last, and I don't much like keeping the servants up. Where do you live? Somewhere in Chelsea, isn't it? How are you going? I think you've just about got time to catch the last tube from Green Park. Do you mind if I come with you as far as South Kensington? It gives you a chance for your ideal murder!" And Caird grinned.

"As you like," said Evans. And they left the club together.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHAT HAPPENED AT GREEN PARK

WHAT actually did happen on the platform of Green Park tube station between eleven and half-past that night? That was the point principally under consideration by Inspector Spears as he was whirled northward in a first-class carriage on his way to Leeds, whither he was bound to investigate the other end of Rodney Fleming's telephone call. He had heard one account from Julian Caird at Norwood the same night, and a second from Stewart Evans that morning at Broadcasting House, and the more he thought of it, the more singular the whole occurrence seemed. Fortunately he was alone in the carriage, so he could light his pipe, put his feet up, and give his undivided attention to getting this particular offshoot of what was now generally known as the Broadcasting House Case into its proper perspective.

Caird's account, divested of its more emotional trimmings and a good deal of almost hysterical repetition, came to this: He had, on Rodney Fleming's suggestion—with which he heartily agreed—prevented Evans from paying an intended call on Mrs. Dryden after dinner. As a result, a fight between the two men almost eventuated. Caird, ashamed that a personal antipathy should have gone to such lengths, made a suggestion of reconciliation, which Evans received first coldly, but ultimately with every appearance of gratitude and sincerity. They walked together to Caird's club and sat there talking pleasantly and intimately until about eleven o'clock, the conversation ultimately turning upon the Broadcasting House murder, and from that to a discussion of murder methods in general. This part of the conversation, Caird insisted, was initiated by Evans, at a time when he felt sleepy and was only too anxious to find an excuse to go home. Evans ultimately produced the theory that the easiest way of murdering anyone would be to push him under a tube train as if by mistake. This was referred to again jocularly by Caird when at last they decided to go home and left the club together to walk to Green Park tube station.

So far, the two stories coincided fairly exactly, except that Evans omitted the struggle which had taken place outside Mrs. Dryden's flat and said that it was Caird who had brought the conversation at the club round to murder. The statements of both men further agreed in bringing them to Green Park tube station at about twenty minutes past eleven, and in saying that the platform for trains westward bound was by that time entirely deserted except for an elderly gentleman of military appearance, who looked rather the worse for drink and was sprawling rather than sitting upon a wooden bench just inside the entrance to the platform. Thus far things were pretty clear. As to what followed, while the facts in each story were the same, the rôles of the protagonists were precisely reversed. According to Caird, as they reached the platform, a train drew out, and knowing that at such a time of night there is always a considerable lapse of time before the arrival of the next one, he linked arms with Evans and walked with him up and down the platform talking departmental "shop." He insisted that he was on the outside—that is to say, nearest the rails. According to Evans, arms were never linked, and they walked up and down in silence. These small discrepancies seemed to Spears comparatively unimportant. In any event, about seven minutes later, as the roar of the next train swelled down the tunnel and flooded into the station, the two men were standing at the extreme western end of the platform. They were just about to turn inwards to walk back when, hearing the train, they stopped and faced the rails, standing side by side. On this point, and on the further one that Caird was standing the nearer of the two to the approaching train, the statements agreed. What followed? According to Caird, Evans suddenly caught him by the right elbow and, affecting to stumble, pushed him violently forward, so that he would have been bound to fall under the wheels of the approaching train, if he had not flung himself desperately sideways and landed on the platform on the point of his shoulder. Evans's tale was that he actually did stumble, and Caird seized the moment when he was off his balance to try and push him onto the rails. He went on to add that after the conversation in the club he had anticipated the possibility of such an action on Caird's part, and so was sufficiently prepared to avoid the thrust of Caird's elbow, the result being that Caird overbalanced and fell on the platform. In other words, each man accused the other of a deliberate attempt at murder by the same method; a method whose feasibility they had previously discussed in the smoking room of a club only a quarter of an hour before.

To be honest, Spears was less interested in what had happened at the tube station than in what such a happening implied with regard to the murder of Sidney Parsons. Perhaps his principal merit as a detective was his ability to keep his eyes on the essential part of a case and to disregard the less important offshoots from it. There were three possibilities: If Caird had tried to murder Evans, the reasonable deduction was that Caird was the murderer of Parsons, that Evans was getting unpleasantly near the truth concerning that murder, and that Caird had done his best at the tube station to silence him for good. If Evans had tried to murder Caird, the converse would apply, or, alternatively, Caird, driven beyond endurance by Evans's persecution of Dryden, had chosen this way of putting the latter's most dangerous enemy off his trail for good. If only it had been possible to track down the intoxicated man of military appearance, or if the driver of the train had seen something conclusive, the detective might have had some sort of clue to work on. But the former had vanished without trace, and the latter had seen nothing more significant than Julian Caird getting up from the platform with a furious expression on his face, rubbing his shoulder and dusting his clothes preliminary to bolting to the escalators at the end of the platform. Evans had gone on to Earls Court in the train. Caird had taken a taxi to Norwood. . . .

Immediately after he had received from Stewart Evans his account of this peculiar incident, Spears, finding that he had a spare half-hour before it was necessary for him to leave to catch his train to the north, had asked for an interview with General Farquharson. He found the latter in his office, his desk encumbered by a mass of formidable-looking files.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, sir," began the detective. "I can see you're busy——"

"Not at all, Spears, not at all. Glad to see you. Sit down, won't you? Well, I hope this means that you've some good news for me?"

"Well, not exactly," Spears confessed. "In fact, you may feel that what I'm going to ask you is something of an impertinence. But in any case, I should like you, if you will, to treat my question as an entirely confidential one."

The General looked grim.

"Well, Inspector?"

"Well, sir, would it be possible for you to give me in confidence your opinion of two members of your staff—Mr. Caird and Mr. Evans?"

"Caird and Evans, Inspector? What's all this? Has there been some new development?"

"Not exactly, sir." Spears was feeling his way cautiously. He did not feel justified in damaging the professional prospects of either Evans or Caird by telling the controller what had happened at the tube station. "I'm bound to make every sort of enquiry, you'll understand, into the background of each of the people who were most intimately concerned with the tragedy——"

"Come to the point, Inspector. You mean that both Caird and Evans are on your list of possible suspects?"

"Yes, sir," said the detective reluctantly. "Not that personally I've anything——"

"It isn't your business to have anything personally against anyone, I know that. I know that you've got to do your duty. Inspector. You needn't be so apologetic about it. But I can tell you this," and the General took out his eyeglass and spun it on the blotting pad in front of him. "I no more believe in the possibility of the guilt of either of those two members of my staff than I do in my own! Is that good enough for you?"

"I expected you to say that, sir. But at the same time your impression of them as individuals might be helpful."

"Very well," said the General. "But you must understand clearly that I'm giving you my *impressions,* and that you'll be very wrong if you draw any definite conclusions from anything I may tell you. I know to begin with that Caird and Evans don't get on well. It's an unfortunate fact; but I think it's greatly to the credit of both of them that this lack of a good personal relationship has, to the best of my knowledge, never damaged their work. Caird's departmental reports upon Evans have always been scrupulously fair, and Evans has never tried to go behind Caird's back or over his head—if you follow me."

"Quite so, sir."

"From the point of view of broadcasting, I've nothing but good to say of both of them, though on the whole you may be surprised to hear that I think Evans is probably the more valuable of the two. Caird is a good producer and runs his department competently enough, but he's by no means irreplaceable. He hasn't much imagination, and certainly no distinctive creative ability. I don't mean that he's stupid, but he's a good deal of a romantic sentimentalist. He's not really up to date, and the one thing that I really have against him is that he's damnably intolerant, particularly of men like Evans who are a little queer temperamentally."

"I see, sir. Please go on."

"Evans is frankly a queer fish. I know he's not popular, and he's completely lacking in charm, but from the point of view of brain and knowledge of the programme side of broadcasting, he's one of the best men we have. Perhaps Caird's worst failing has been his inability to find the proper sympathetic treatment necessary to bring out the best in Evans."

Spears nodded.

"But I must repeat, Inspector, don't draw false conclusions. If I have seemed to sum up rather against Caird, it's only because I am particularly anxious to be fair to Evans. To come down to brass tacks, if I were asked which of the two would be more likely to commit a murder, I could only reply—with the greatest emphasis— *neither;* and their behaviour since the discovery of the crime is only a confirmation of my view."

And with that Spears had had to be content and leave the General to refix his eyeglass and return to the consideration of his files.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SPEARS GOES BY TRAIN

IT WAS, therefore, with considerable relief that the detective abandoned for the time being his intensive chewing on such an indigestible lump of new material and applied himself to his purely routine investigation in Leeds. He was met at the station by a youthful but intelligent member of the local constabulary, who regarded him with satisfactory awe and evidently accepted his arrival as something of a personal compliment.

The stage door of the Imperial Theatre at Leeds is very typical of its kind. The theatre itself is old-fashioned, and, like so many provincial houses, is suffering severely from a refusal to recognize that a touring company in a London success, housed in a theatre with comfortless and expensive seats, can hardly hope to vie on equal terms with an up-to-date cinema showing up-to-date films at about half the price.

The Leeds policeman, whose name was Stevens, led Spears up a narrow alley, grimy and ill paved, and knocked at a door from which most of the paint had long disappeared. Above it, a pane of frosted glass bore the cryptic letters: "S T - G - D - O -" No one answered his knock, and after a bit Stevens laughed, turned the handle, and went in. Spears found himself thrust straight away into that singular backstage atmosphere so incomprehensible in its confusion to the layman. On his right was the stage doorkeeper's little office, its walls plastered with the signed photographs of actors and actresses covering the past four decades. A neglected kettle on a gas ring spouted forth a melancholy cloud of steam. Just inside the door on the left was a green baize board, across which lengths of faded tape had been fastened with drawing pins, so as to hold letters. Two framed and signed photographs held places of honour at each end of the red rep-covered mantelpiece—one of Ada Rehan, in the remarkable tights of her period, as Rosalind; the other of Ellen Terry as Beatrice. Between the two a small ginger kitten slept unconcernedly with its tail over its face. Spears nodded with satisfaction at sight of an old-fashioned telephone, of the type with a handle, in the far corner of what was no more than a cubbyhole, half buried between a pile of programmes and a confectioner's cake box.

"The stage doorkeeper will be back for his tea in a minute—sure to be," said Stevens. "Or would you like us to go through, sir, and try and find the manager? I'm afraid none of the company will be about at this time of day."

Spears hesitated. Straight ahead of him a bare stone passage led away into darkness and obscurity. Another green baize board held two or three advertisements from local laundries and local landladies, the company's train call for the following Sunday, and a list of dressing rooms with their allotted occupants. Two or three large hampers, which he realized must be what are technically known as "theatrical baskets," lay about forlornly. Through half-open double doors on the left a few yards along, Spears could see the desolation of a half-stripped stage, the dusty piles of properties and furniture, and the uninspiring back of a lowered curtain. But apart from the cat and the kettle, there was no sign of life or movement, and Spears, contrasting it with the never-ceasing activity of Broadcasting House, felt as if he had not only travelled to Leeds, but backwards some thirty years in time. . . .

He was just about to tell Stevens that they would give up the stage doorkeeper and investigate the possibilities of the manager's office in the front of the house, when the stage door behind them reopened, and a young man, wearing a smart grey felt hat and double-breasted grey flannel suit, walked in with a burberry over his arm.

"I beg your pardon," said Spears, "but can you tell me where I can get hold of the stage doorkeeper?"

"Sorry, no idea," replied the young man, smiling amiably and showing excellent teeth. "Anything I can do?"

"Not unless you can put us on to the manager, or the manager of the company that's playing here this week," said Spears.

"If that's what you want, you've come to the right shop," said the young man, throwing his burberry onto the chair in the stage doorkeeper's cubbyhole. "I'm managing this show—for what it's worth, which, believe me, isn't very much, though it was my brother who wrote it. I told him it was too sophisticated for the provinces, but he wouldn't believe me. Obstinate devil!"

"You are Mr. George Fleming?"

"I am George Fleming," said the young man, with a little bow. "A poor name, but mine own. What can I do for you? Who are you, anyway? Don't tell me it's a reporter and fame at last!"

"Nothing so exciting, I'm afraid," said Spears. "My name's Spears. I'm a detective from Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard?" said the young man. "What ho! Which of the cast are you after? I warn you, I've no capable understudies, so if you pinch any of my principals, you'll be responsible for ruining a perfectly good tour!"

Stevens looked at Spears anxiously. But if he expected to witness a marvellous example of subtle professional enquiry, he was disappointed.

"Nothing as serious as that, Mr. Fleming," said Spears. "This is purely a routine enquiry. Of course you've heard of this unfortunate Broadcasting House Case?"

"I should think I jolly well had! That lucky beggar Rodney's bang in the middle of it. He does get all the luck, that brother of mine. Never let one of your brothers become a celebrity, Inspector. It's the deuce of a handicap to a commonplace hard-working fellow like me, I can tell you."

"I've just come up to make this routine enquiry on the spot," said Spears, taking out his notebook. "Would you mind answering me a few questions?"

"Of course."

"I believe on the night of the crime you spoke to your brother at Broadcasting House on the telephone?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me the time you put the call through?"

George Fleming shook his head. "Afraid not. But probably the stage doorkeeper could. He got the number for me."

"Do you mind giving me the subject of that call?"

"I say," said the young man, "is old Rodney under the eye of the police? What a lark! No, of course I'll tell you. I don't suppose you want me to go into a lot of detail, but shortly it was like this: One of the parts in this play of my brother's was hopelessly miscast for the tour, as we found out during the first week—that's last week at Birmingham. Well, we couldn't get another actor, so I suggested to Rodney that the part should be rewritten. He agreed, after a good deal of grumbling—you know what these authors are—and as he was pretty busy over this broadcasting thing of his, he left the rewriting of the part to me."

"Yes?"

"Only he insisted that before the rewritten part was actually staged, I should talk it over again with him on the telephone."

"I see," said Spears. "Was there much of it?"

"Not much," said George Fleming. "Do you happen to know the play?"

"I saw it when it was being done in London."

"That's a help. You remember the part of the father-in-law, then?"

"Yes, well."

"Well, it was the first scene of the last act he couldn't play. I suppose I rewrote about three pages."

"I see. Tell me, why did you choose that time of night to telephone to your brother?"

"I say, Inspector," said George Fleming, "are you trying to get something on me?" But Spears's expression did not change, and the young man went on: "Oh, I don't know. In the first place, it's easy to get a line quickly at that time of night; secondly, it's much cheaper; thirdly, I was certain of catching Rodney, as he'd told me where he was going to be; and finally, there's a telephone here which there isn't in my digs. Is that good enough for you?"

"Quite, thanks. How long did your call last?"

"As far as I can remember, I had three minutes twice."

"Anyway, I can get that from the exchange," murmured Spears. "Thank you very much, Mr. Fleming. I suppose you didn't happen to know this Mr. Parsons?"

"Never heard of him," said George Fleming cheerfully. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"One thing," said Spears. "Could you let me have a copy of that part of the last act which you rewrote? I'll send it back to you tomorrow."

George Fleming stared. "Of course," he said, "if you want it. But it's all right, you know—Rodney agreed to it, and we're playing it with that revision now."

"Still, I'd like it," Spears insisted.

"I'll get it," said the young man. "It's in my dressing room." And he walked away along the passage whistling cheerfully.

As he did so, an old man with a thick crop of very white hair, limp, gold-rimmed spectacles, and a cherry-wood pipe came out of the door leading to the stage and, with a muttered "Excuse me," hobbled over to the steaming kettle and turned off the gas with one hand, scratching the back of the kitten's neck with the other. The latter cocked one ear, purred twice, and went to sleep again.

"Are you the stage doorkeeper?" asked Stevens.

The old man turned round. His face was very red and seamed all over with fine purple veins, but his eyes were extremely blue and twinkling.

"I am that, sir. Harold Staples, my name is—known mostly in the profession as Old Harry. Been on this door for the best part of forty years, I have. And what might I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I would be glad, Staples, if you'd answer a few questions that this gentleman will ask you. He's a detective inspector from London."

"Police?" said the old man briskly. "Now, look here, I've been on this door, as I say, for the best part of forty years and never had so much as words with a policeman all that time. It's been said as I'm past my work, but no one's ever dared to say anything about my honesty! Besides, I've got my tea to get."

"Mr. Staples," said Spears, "I don't want you to misunderstand me. There's no question of your honesty. There's nothing whatsoever against you, but I'm making a routine enquiry in connection with this Broadcasting House murder, and I'd be grateful if you could tell me one or two things."

The stage doorkeeper dropped his indignation as swiftly as he had assumed it and became almost genial.

"Ah—that Broadcasting House case!" he repeated. "Very interesting and mysterious, I find it, sir. As you can imagine, I've plenty of time to give to listening, sitting here night after night. I've got a little portable, and when it's tuned down it's safe not to be heard on the stage, so I can amuse myself in my own way. But I must say, sir, I was properly aggravated about that case."

"Were you, Mr. Staples? Why?"

"Because," said the stage doorkeeper, "I heard two thirds of that blasted play, and pretty dull I found it, I must confess. I don't hold with these plays, sir, if you ask me. The talks is what I follow. Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Heard. Amazing how much they know, and what I say is, it's never too late to be educated. But I never heard the murder scene. I reckon that would have been something like a thrill!"

"Do you mean to say you switched off?" said Spears.

"I had to, sir. You see, Mr. Fleming was in here with me listening, too—of course you know it was his brother as wrote the play—and when he asked me to get him a call through to London, I had to turn the set off."

"You were in here when Mr. Fleming spoke on the telephone?"

"Certainly I was, sir," said the old man with dignity. "This is my room, and Mr. Fleming said nothing about it being private. Not that I listened, sir, of course. But I couldn't help hearing that it was something to do with a bit of this play that's here this week. A scene had been rewritten, I understand."

"And did you switch on again when Mr. Fleming had finished telephoning?"

"No, sir. To tell you the truth, the publics close here at half-past ten, and when he'd finished, Mr. Fleming said: 'Harry,' he said, 'that's done. I think we've just time for a last quick one,' and he took me over the road to the King's Head. A pleasant young gentleman, Mr. Fleming. Oh, here he is, sir!"

And George Fleming came back along the passage, still whistling, carrying some pages of typescript loosely clipped together.

"Here's what you want, Inspector," he began. "Oh, I see you've found Old Harry. He can tell you anything more you want to know about that famous telephone call. He put it through for me."

"So I understand," said Spears. "Well, I don't think I need trouble either of you further. Thank you for answering my questions so straightforwardly."

And refusing a rather diffident invitation from Stevens to have dinner with him, the detective returned to the station and caught the next train back to London, leaving George Fleming and Old Harry respectively with considerable food for thought and gossip after their separate fashions.

It was a pity for young Stevens, who, for a provincial constable, was well above the average both in ambition and intelligence, that he could not accompany Spears on his return journey, anxious as he was to see a Scotland Yard man working at close quarters.

This time Spears was not alone in his carriage, and the wealthy Yorksire manufacturer and his rather overdressed, plump daughter who shared it with him were first puzzled and finally rendered acutely uneasy by the detective's behaviour. For a long time he lay back in his corner seat, his eyes shut and his expression perfectly blank, while the whole panorama of the case was passed slowly through his mind. In his imagination, the various incidents of tragedy tragedy repeated themselves like the scenes of a film unreeled in slow motion. In his mind's eye he saw Julian Caird at the dramatic control panel whispering hurriedly to Hancock, jumping up from his chair, and hurrying to 6A. He saw Rodney Fleming, languid and debonair, in the 6A listening room, the telephone to his ear, his eyes on the actors in 6A. He saw Stewart Evans prowling furtively along a corridor; and Parsons hissing his soliloquy into the microphone, while a gloved and faceless figure tiptoed through the door of 7C behind him. He saw Higgins's ravaged face; the General's eyeglass; and Bannister's untidy hair. Once more he sat in Listening Hall No. 1 and heard the blattnerphone recording of a dead man's voice and the ticking of an unknown watch——

Suddenly he sat up, opened his eyes, and said "By God!" with such a wealth of expression that the Yorkshire manufacturer dropped his newspaper; while his daughter glanced downwards under the cover of her magazine to make sure that she was not exposing too much leg.

But Spears was completely oblivious of the effect he was producing on the other occupants of the carriage. He took from a leather portfolio which he carried with him the copy of Parsons's script of *The Scarlet Highwayman* with its mutilated outside page, and for perhaps the hundredth time he read over most carefully the scene of the gaoler's soliloquy and murder. At the end of it he drew a long breath, grinned with satisfaction, and made a pencil note in the margin. Then he took out the script which George Fleming had given him at the Imperial Theatre, Leeds, glanced at his wrist watch, and began to read that also. As he read it, his lips moved distinctly, and the wealthy Yorkshire manufacturer was seriously considering pulling the communication cord, or at least moving along the corridor to another compartment, when Spears, with another glance at his watch, folded up the second script, replaced them both in the portfolio, leaned back in his corner, folded his arms, and went to sleep.

"There's nothing," he murmured to himself as he dropped off, "like travel for broadening the mind!"

CHAPTER XXIX

TOPSY DOES HER BIT

IN SPITE of what Caird had said about the growing unpleasantness of "atmosphere" at Broadcasting House, there seemed to be a complete absence of any change in the normal routine when Spears crossed its threshold the morning after his visit to Leeds. Prospero still regarded Portland Place over one shoulder, with his enigmatically cynical expression. Uniformed small boys conducted visitors, or carried messages and antiseptic sprays upon their lawful occasions. The reception-desk telephones and the general office typewriters buzzed and clattered unceasingly. The glass-fronted boards opposite the artists' lifts showed their usual lists of rehearsals and transmission-studio accommodation. In fact, the only change from the normal was provided by a respectable old lady accosting one of the commissionaires outside the main entrance. Brandishing a battered parasol at Eric Gill's statuary, she observed in a high and penetrating tone: "If that's the kind of aërial the B.B.C. puts up for itself, I hope they don't expect me to follow their example. I've always lived in a respectable neighbourhood, and a pole and a bit of wire's good enough for me!"

Not that Spears overheard this masterly defense of

British proprieties. By the time it was being delivered, he was again in Caird's office and wondering, not for the first time, why that young man decorated his walls with a set of admirable drawings of cats interspersed with photographs of the interiors of the group of dramatic studios. Caird was out of the room at a meeting, and, while he waited, Spears stared for several minutes at the photograph of 7C. It had been taken from the doorway and showed the studio precisely as it must have appeared to the murderer as he entered it that evening. Had he really got it at last, Spears wondered? Or was he really being just a little bit too damned ingenious? And the more he looked at the photograph, the more his self-confidence diminished. . . .

At the same time, whether he was being overingenious or not, Spears was only too well aware that he had to risk it. For the attempt to break down Leopold Dryden's silence had failed—or, if it had not completely failed, it had only led to another dead end. He had heard that morning that, pressed to speak by Isabel in the presence both of his solicitor and of no less a person than the assistant commissioner himself, Leopold Dryden had admitted that his original attitude had been dictated partly by natural arrogance, but mainly because he had feared the implication of his wife. Having been out of the studio at the critical moment, it was impossible for him to find out whether she also had been absent or not without drawing other people's attention to this possibility. That he had not dared to do, and accordingly he made up his mind to maintain silence at all costs, without realizing that there are times when a refusal to speak can be as dangerous as any amount of garrulity. So far, so good. It provided a reason for his silence, but when it came to the point, Dryden was revealed as having next to nothing to say. "Very well," he had exclaimed, and it was easy for Spears to imagine the flash of his blue eyes and the histrionic toss of his head with which he faced Major Cavendish, "I'll make a clean breast of it. I *had* quarrelled with my wife at dinner over a letter from Parsons. It appears that he'd got a certain amount of money out of her by threatening to tell me of some secret in her past life. I was angry—not because of what that secret might be—I believe, Major Cavendish, that a woman's past life is her own affair—but because she hadn't told me about this revolting attempt at blackmail in the first instance. It argued a want of trust, which hit me hard. I admit I fully intended to take the first opportunity of horsewhipping Parsons, but I wouldn't have chosen a time during which I was professionally engaged to do such a thing. Still less would I have risked the possibility of hanging for such a miserable specimen of humanity. I have my own pride, Major Cavendish. In addition, I was ill that night. I suffer considerably from"—he coughed—"my stomach, especially when under any form of nervous strain. My first nights are always agony to me. I found the atmosphere of the studios rather trying. I know the ventilation is scientifically perfect, but to anyone at all susceptible to claustrophobia, padded walls and an entire absence of windows—well, you understand.

If you ask me why I went up to the seventh floor, I can only repeat that I followed that spiral staircase automatically. Being ignorant of the building's geography, I thought it would probably take me out of the tower more quickly than any other way. I was naturally abashed when I ran into Mr. Caird after I had had my breath of fresh air. I am most sensitive professionally, and I thought that he, ignorant of the circumstances, might have thought that I was neglecting my work. I'm afraid there's nothing more I can tell you."

So much for Leopold Dryden's statement. Spears had found a copy of it on his desk at Scotland Yard that morning, with a covering note from the assistant commissioner.

Dear Spears, ran the note, *I must tell you that I believe the attached statement to be strictly within the bounds of truth. In the circumstances, I consider it vital that Dryden should not be brought to trial. The real criminal must be found and found quickly. To release Dryden without making another arrest would produce a deplorable impression on the public. But we shall, of course, be compelled to do so, unless the real solution can be discovered within forty-eight hours. I rely on you to make the most of your chances.* "Which is," thought Spears, "a polite way of hinting that there'll be the devil to pay if I don't bring it off."

He had just arrived at that depressing conclusion when Caird returned from his meeting. The dramatic director was not looking his best. His eyes looked bloodshot, as if he had not been sleeping, and the hand with which he offered the detective his glass cigarette box was none too steady.

"Well, Spears, what is it now?" he said wearily. "I don't mind telling you I'm feeling dead to the world. I simply can't do my normal work with this filthy thing hanging over my head. Would you mind if I asked for a few days' special leave? I'm afraid I shall crack up if I go on much longer."

"I'm afraid you must wait for a day or two yet," said Spears. "But I hope it won't be longer now than forty-eight hours."

Caird stiffened in his chair.

"Have you really got somewhere?" he exclaimed.

"I'm not sure," said Spears cautiously, "but I'm beginning to think so. You'll be glad to hear that Leopold Dryden, though still officially under arrest, is authoritatively considered out of the running."

"So Isabel made him speak? Thank God for that! What did he say?"

"Very little, except to give as a reason for his silence that he was afraid to implicate her."

"I see," said Caird. "Well, that narrows the field a bit, doesn't it? Higgins dead—Dryden out—it only leaves Evans—Rodney—and me!" And he laughed nervously. "Do you remember playing eena, meena, mina, mo, when you were a kid? It used to be quite exciting." He moved away from his desk and walked up and down the room.

"Now listen, Caird," said the detective sharply. "You know the controller promised me another play-through of that steel tape recording? Can you arrange for it to be done tonight?"

"Yes," said Caird, stopping in his nervous prowl. "I think so."

"The point is," said Spears, "that naturally we want to release Dryden as quickly as possible; but for our own sake," he added, with a suspicion of a smile, "we want to have someone else ready to fill the vacant cell, so I've got to work quick. You remember what Mr. Bannister said about that watch ticking? Well, immediately after hearing that recording played through, I want you to arrange for the people who had wrist watches on that night and who were possibly concerned—that's to say, yourself, Mr. Fleming, and Mr. Evans—to be in 7C. I'll bring Mr. Dryden and his watch along. Will you arrange for the microphone to be alive and connected to some conveniently adjacent loud speaker, so that I can hear what these various watches sound like?"

Caird scribbled some notes on his pad.

"Will about half-past eleven tonight suit you?" he said.

"Capitally, thanks. And you'll ask Mr. Fleming to come along, and Mr. Evans?"

"I will," said Caird. "By the way, what about that tube station business?"

Spears shrugged.

"My dear Caird, what do you expect me to do about it? There were no witnesses worth a damn, and your stories contradict each other mutually and absolutely."

He went to the door and turned round. "If I were you—and you can tell Mr. Evans so from me—I'd wash it out as an accident exaggerated into something else by a couple of vivid imaginations. Till tonight, then."

And he went out, leaving Caird, who had been looking forward to a long night's sleep, to mutter various and undignified oaths, and then to press the button on his desk for Ian Macdonald, whom he instructed to make the necessary arrangements with the sound-recording section and the engineers to meet Spears's requirements for the evening.

As Spears crossed the hall on his way out, one of the receptionists moved towards him from behind his desk.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "But you are Inspector Spears?"

"Certainly."

"Well, sir," went on the receptionist, his voice discreetly lowered, "there's a young lady here enquiring for you, but I don't think she knows you. If you want to slip away, I can easily——"

"What's her name?" interrupted Spears.

"Miss Levine. I believe she's a friend of Mr. Bannister's, sir. I've seen them together."

Spears glanced cautiously over the receptionist's shoulder. He remembered Corkran's report on the incidents concerning Higgins's suicide, and accordingly he had no doubt that the owner of an extremely attractive pair of legs and a quantity of curling platinum hair under a minute woollen cap that resembled more than anything else an army forage cap of the 'eighties was Miss Topsy Levine.

"I'm in rather a hurry," he said. "If the young lady doesn't mind walking down to Oxford Circus with me——"

"I'll tell her," said the receptionist.

It was clear that nothing was likely to deter Miss Topsy Levine from the pleasure of walking as far as Oxford Circus with Detective Inspector Spears. She bounded across the hall like a puppy, introduced herself shrilly, and proceeded to take Spears by the arm, rather to his embarrassment and distinctly to the amusement of the General, who happened to be crossing the hall at the same moment on his way to an early lunch.

"I know I oughtn't to bother you like this," babbled Topsy cheerfully, as they passed the Round Church, "but it's only because you've frightened poor Guy so much, Inspector. You see, he and Pat and I were out together again last night. It's really awfully nice of them to take me along, when they're as soppy about each other as they are. But then there's nothing like good nature, is there?"

"But how have I frightened Mr. Bannister?" asked Spears.

"Well, not so much frightened, perhaps," said Topsy, "as snubbed. You know—all the ideas he's had about the murder. Each time you've thought of the same thing first and only told him so afterwards, so that you've made him feel pretty small. But we were talking it over again last night, and he told us he'd got another idea, only he was too scared to come and tell you about it."

"So you thought you'd come and tell me in his place, did you, Miss Levine?"

"Well," said Topsy frankly, "men are so silly, aren't they? A girl's just got to take them by the scruff of their necks and give them a kick in the pants!"

"Er—quite," said Spears. "Well, what's the great idea?"

"Ooh, you mustn't get sarcastic with me, or I shall cry. I'd better warn you, Inspector, I cry terribly easily."

Spears patted her arm comfortingly. "Come along," he said, "I shan't bite."

Topsy screwed up her face into an expression of puzzled but attractive bewilderment, and hesitated.

"Well, I'm sure I hope I've got it right," she burst out. "But I think what Guy said was this. He wondered why nobody seemed to be worrying much what it was in Mrs. Dryden's early life that Parsons had been blackmailing her for."

"Yes, I know," said Spears.

"Oh, so you did think of it?"

"The idea had certainly crossed my mind, but don't you see the difficulty, Miss Levine? Mrs. Dryden's letters which were found on Parsons' body gave no clue to the matter. Parsons isn't alive to tell us, and Mrs. Dryden declines to—not altogether unnaturally. Now it isn't as if there were any complete record in existence of Mrs. Dryden's life, and this might have to do with anything that has happened during the past ten or twelve years. Mrs. Dryden is not a lady with a notorious reputation or anything like that—most actresses are entirely respectable. I've made certain enquiries, and certainly since her marriage there hasn't been a word of scandal about her, apart from entirely insignificant gossip. Of course, before her marriage, she might have done anything, but it isn't easy to get any details of the private life of a woman over four years ago, when there was nothing about that woman at the time to make her interesting or worth while observing. After all, she was only a chorus girl, and then a touring actress. I made investigations at the stage doors of one or two London theatres at which she had appeared, and I then got hold of one or two touring managers who had employed her. But apart from her name, and in one case her looks, nobody remembered anything about her, except that afterwards she married Leopold Dryden."

Topsy suddenly tugged at the detective's sleeve.

"Would you mind giving me a drink?" she said.

"Of course I would be delighted to," stammered Spears, "but I'm really in rather a hurry."

"Oh, rats!" said Topsy rudely. "I'm not cadging a drink, but we can't talk out here with all this shocking traffic noise, and now *I've* got something to tell you! And this isn't one of Guy's ideas. It isn't even an idea, it's a fact."

Spears looked down at the eager, painted little face and made up his mind.

"All right," he said. "We'll go to the balcony of the Café Royal *brasserie* and drink beer."

"Gin and tonic for this little girl, if you don't mind," said Topsy. "But let's go."

They went. And Topsy having been provided with the drink she wanted and headed off various alternative subjects, such as the new decoration of the restaurant and why certain young men wear bracelets and green trousers, came to the point.

"You know, Inspector," she began, "I think you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, going to see touring managers and stage doorkeepers. Why don't you get hold of the old programmes of Mrs. Dryden's tours, and then find people who'd been on tours with her?"

Spears sipped at his beer thoughtfully.

"Yes, there's a good deal in that," he admitted. "But do you mean to tell me, Miss Levine, that there would be any chance of finding actors who had been out on tour four years ago? As likely as not they're in Australia, or retired, or dead. And if they've succeeded enough to be in London, I'd be prepared to bet that they wouldn't remember what had happened to the other members of the cast of a tour four or five years ago."

"Well," said Topsy excitedly, "you'd lose your bet!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you'd lose your bet, Inspector. For one, this little girl was on tour with Isabel Dryden—Isabel Palmer she called herself in those days—in a play called *Overseas*. I was understudying and doing assistant stage manager on three quid a week. That's the type your touring manager is, whom you're so fond of! Isabel Palmer had quite a small part——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Spears. "But what do you remember about her?"

"I was just coming to that," said Topsy in an injured tone of voice. "I don't remember much, of course. You wouldn't expect me to. For instance, I can't remember at all what the play was about, except that the hero had a pet dog which was always misbehaving itself on the stage at awkward moments. But there were two or three things which might be useful to you. A fellow called Parsons was in the company, and a nasty bit of work he was, too. Tried to kiss me once, and how I smacked his face!"

"Are you sure of that?" said Spears. "That his name was Parsons, I mean?"

"Of course I'm sure. Aren't I telling you? And the other thing is that I can remember there being a lot of talk about Isabel having an affair with another chap in the company called Evans. At least I'm pretty certain it was Evans. That's why, as I told you, you ought to get hold of some programmes."

"Evans?" repeated Spears. "But . . . You haven't got one of those programmes, I suppose, Miss Levine?"

"Sorry, nothing doing. I never keep anything. No possessions means a long life, I always say." And Topsy finished her drink. "I'm afraid I haven't anything more to tell you, Inspector. I wish I could remember whether that name really was Evans or not, but I'm almost certain it was."

"I wish you could, too," muttered Spears. "*Overseas,* you say the name of the play was?"

"*Overseas*—or *The Rover of the Seas*—or something silly like that."

"Can't you be a bit more certain or accurate?" Spears pleaded. "This is desperately important, you know."

" 'Fraid not," said Topsy. "In fact, to be strictly honest, the more I think about it, the easier it is for me to think of other names. But I'll swear it was something like Evans. They used to go to the same digs, you know, and all that sort of thing. Lots of us thought they lived together, but you never know, do you? People are so funny. Well, I must fly. So long!"

Left to himself, Spears ordered more beer and lighted a pipe. What Topsy had told him gave him very furiously to think. Of course it was possible that Stewart Evans had done a spot of acting in the course of his checkered career, and that Isabel had once been his mistress. That might account for the fury with which he had assailed Dryden, and for his apparently extraordinary conduct all round with regard to Dryden's wife. But if that had been the case, why hadn't Isabel said so and driven the suspicion which Evans had tried to rouse against Dryden back on his own head? It was surely inconceivable that she could be in love with him still. But one thing was very clear: Isabel must be strictly questioned about that tour of *Overseas,* or whatever its name was. And mentally he cursed Topsy's relatively inefficient memory. The whole resources of Scotland Yard, if necessary, must be put onto finding a copy of the programme of the tour of that old and forgotten play.

"Between this yarn and the evidence of that recording tape," Spears muttered to himself, "I'm damned if I don't begin to believe that Stewart Evans did it, after all."

CHAPTER XXX

ISABEL AT BAY

WHILE he hurriedly devoured a tongue sandwich and a little potato salad, Spears, after his own plodding remorseless fashion, took his decision. After what Topsy Levine had told him, there was little doubt but that the final solution of the mystery lay with Isabel—or, at least, in her flat. It would be a sufficiently unpleasant business, but she would have to be tackled face to face, and the sooner the better. Besides, from his own point of view, he had no time to lose, and it was more than likely that she would be in her flat between one and two. . . .

He paid his bill and walked rapidly from Regent Street to Upper St. Martin's Lane; and was lucky in that Isabel answered the door herself. He noticed that she was looking considerably more cheerful and that she was wearing bright colours and a certain amount of jewelry. So she had obviously drawn the right conclusions with regard to the change in Leopold Dryden's prospects.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" she said. "I'm afraid I'm having my lunch. It's only half a lobster and a salad, but I expect I could find a scrap for you, if you haven't had yours already."

"Thanks, very much," said Spears, "I've lunched, but perhaps you wouldn't mind my asking you a few more questions while you finish yours?"

The gaiety died out of Isabel's face at once.

"Not more questions?" she whispered. "Surely it's all over now, as far as I'm concerned?"

Spears shifted his feet awkwardly. "I beg you to believe that I'm more than sorry to trouble you again, Mrs. Dryden, but it's really very necessary that I should have another talk with you."

"Oh, very well," said Isabel and led the way upstairs into the white dining room. She gave Spears a chair and sat down herself in her place, although she showed no disposition to resume her meal. But Spears noticed that she finished her glass of wine at a draught.

"Well, what is it, Inspector?" she said. "I thought you'd realized by this time that I've nothing more to tell you which could possibly be helpful."

"But I'm afraid that's where I must disagree with you, Mrs. Dryden. There's one thing more which you can tell me and which it is most essential that you should. There have been certain developments which make the omission of this particular information a crucial point in the case, and although it involves delving into your private affairs, which I am naturally very loath to do, I feel it is my duty to say to you as emphatically as possible that the moment has come for you to give me information concerning the episode in your life which Sidney Parsons was using for the purpose of blackmail."

He paused. Isabel did not speak. She sat quite rigid in her chair, the fingers of her right hand playing nervously with the stem of her wineglass.

"If I could, Mrs. Dryden, I would go further and promise you that any information you gave me on the point would be regarded as strictly confidential. But it would not be fair of me to give you any such promise. You will see as well as I do that it may be necessary for the whole story to come out in open court when the criminal is tried. But however painful that possibility may appear to you, surely you will see that nothing must stand in the way of the conviction of the guilty person. The possibility of that conviction lies, I am convinced, in your hands."

"I think you've been very fair, Inspector," said Isabel at last. "You haven't tried to trick me or bully me."

"No," said Spears, "that's not in the English police tradition. But that it is not in our tradition is because we rely upon the coöperation of the public."

Again she did not reply, and Spears, who for all his deliberate formality was growing a little impatient, made a false move.

"Mrs. Dryden," he went on, "if for no other reason, you must want to achieve your husband's release by fastening the guilt where it should properly belong. He must remain in danger until you speak. I am positive that you can rely on his understanding, and if necessary on his forgiveness."

The colour came back into Isabel's cheeks.

"If my husband was in danger," she said, "I would tell you anything. But I know he's not. I was there yesterday when he saw the assistant commissioner—when he made his statement. Major Cavendish assured me that after that his release was only a question of time."

Spears mentally consigned Major Cavendish's chivalrous consideration to the devil.

"So long as Leo goes free, what do I care about the rest of it, Inspector? I'm a woman, not a member of your public, as you call it. It may sound a horrible thing to say, but I've no regrets that Sidney Parsons was killed. He deserved to die a hundred times. I'm almost—grateful—to his murderer. He was blackmailing me for something that happened many years ago now, when I was a very young girl and didn't know my way about. What happened then I have regretted ever since, but until Sidney Parsons brought it up again and held it over my head, it was buried and forgotten. You must be reasonable, Inspector. You can't be so inhuman as to imagine that I could tell you about it now in cold blood, knowing that I shall probably have to hear it retold in court, sniggered over by my friends, commented on afterwards in the newspapers, because now I am Leopold Dryden's wife!"

"You can be forced——" Spears began angrily.

"Unless I tell you," interrupted Isabel, "you say you can't bring the matter home. I suppose you're going to say that you could make out that I'm the murderer's accomplice by refusing you vital evidence? Well, I suppose you could, but I don't see how you can until you find the murderer. It's a complete circle, isn't it? After all, what good does it do to hang any man because Parsons was killed? He isn't worth killing a rat for, let alone another human being."

"That has nothing to do with me," said Spears. "I warn you, Mrs. Dryden—though I can to some extent sympathize with your attitude—you're taking up a very dangerous position."

"Well," said Isabel defiantly, "I'm taking the risk. Don't say any more. I've made up my mind, finally."

Choking down a violent desire to lose his temper, the detective got up from his chair, and as he did so the telephone rang.

"Excuse me," said Isabel quickly. "It's in my bedroom. Perhaps you'll let yourself out?"

Spears made a stiff little bow, and she hurried out of the room. As he turned to the door, he heard her voice as she answered the instrument:

"Hullo? Who is it? . . . You, Rodney? Yes. . . . Why can't you give me supper? . . . Going to Broadcasting House again—haven't they finished with you, either?" And then apparently she remembered her visitor, for the door of the bedroom was closed.

Spears felt a momentary satisfaction in that his arrangements had at any rate interfered with Isabel Dryden's supper party. Though baffled, he was not yet beaten, and he had no intention of allowing Isabel to break off the interview in her own time. If she would not speak on the cue he had given her, he would assume a knowledge he hadn't got and press her directly concerning Stewart Evans. Perhaps that would break through her defenses. . . .

And with a desire, as it were, to entrench himself more firmly in the flat, he went out of the dining room through the door which led into the drawing room and sat down in an armchair, with the air of a man set upon a considerable stay.

Like the white dining room, this drawing room had a character of its own appropriate to the general exotic nature of the actor who owned it. The walls were plastered with the playbills of his London successes; the rapier he had worn as Hamlet hung above the mantelpiece, flanked by the daggers of Romeo and Macbeth; on a side table, under a glass case and carefully labelled, were three rings worn by Garrick and Macready, a chain of Irving's, a glove of Lewis Waller's, and a snuffbox of Fred Terry's. Indeed, except for the piano, the room gave the impression of a theatrical museum. The bookshelves contained nothing but plays; volumes of theatrical criticism; various theatrical histories and biographies; and six thick tomes, calf-bound and with gold lettering on their backs: "LEOPOLD DRYDEN. PERSONAL RECORDS."

"Damn it all!" muttered Spears to himself. "If only I were investigating Dryden's past instead of his wife's! He's got the whole thing docketed out. I expect I'd find his birth certificate on the first page, and if I came back in a month, probably all the cuttings relating to this case!"

And then, while he still stared at those six massive tomes and pondered the remarkable personal vanity which they embodied, Spears started violently. He got out of his chair and crossed to the dining-room door. The door into the bedroom was shut, but he could hear the faint murmur of Isabel's voice still talking on the telephone. Quietly he shut the door between the dining room and the drawing room and walked over to the bookshelf. For he had noticed, next to the sixth of Dryden's press-cutting books, a modest little canvas-bound volume, unlettered. It had obviously been pushed into place hastily and so far in as to be nearly invisible, so insignificant did it seem by the side of its impressive comrades. Could it be possible, thought Spears, stretchng out his hand towards it, that this contained the cuttings of Isabel Dryden's personal record?

With another glance over his shoulder, he reached it down and opened it. By Jove, he was right! And a singular collection it contained. Family snapshots; dance programmes; even occasional letters were sandwiched between cuttings from provincial papers and old programmes. . . . "Old programmes!" said Spears aloud. *"Overseas!"* And without considering the ethics of burglary, he jammed the book under his arm, turned on his heel, picked up his hat, and walked rapidly down the stairs. He could not believe that any private telephone call could last much longer, and he did not wish to be compelled to examine Isabel's cutting book under her own eye. . . .

It was not until he was safely back in his own office at the Yard that he could plough steadily through the book. But when he did, on page twenty-two, quite out of chronological order, and sandwiched between a programme of the Military Tournament and a photograph of a young man with a signature scrawled hastily across it, he found what he was looking for. It was a programme of the Shakespeare Theatre at Brighton, for a week in the August of 1927; and dexterously hidden amongst innumerable advertisements Spears found a playbill of *Go As You Please* (O Topsy!) "a Farce in three acts by Harvey Cumberland." A note on the side of the programme said: "Tour of *Go As You Please,* June, July, August, 1927. South Coast towns, Weston-super-Mare to Folkestone."

Hastily Spears ran his eye down the vile print on the faded paper, and then he sat back in his chair and swore. For the name of Isabel Palmer was there as having played the part of the Hon. Enid Faversham, and the assistant stage manager was mentioned as being Miss Topsy Levine, and there was a special note with regard to the leading actor's dog, which had apparently been specially trained and lent by Major Bloodworthy of Chipping Sodbury. But of Stewart Evans there was no sign. And though the possibility remained that he had been in the cast, but under another name, such a chance intensified the difficulties a hundredfold, unless Topsy's singular memory could be jolted again upon the point. Not even the fact that Sidney Parsons was duly mentioned as playing the part of Sam Buckley, a jockey, could afford Spears satisfactory consolation in his disappointment. He lighted his pipe and stared grimly at the old programme. "Damn it!" he said, and almost automatically he began to read down the list of the cast again, speaking aloud:

"Sir Christopher Faversham	*Barrie Lloyd*
"Lady Faversham, his wife	*Agatha Wellman*
"The Hon. Enid Faversham	*Isabel Palmer*
"Gerald Whitby	*Frank Harris*
"Cappy Burroughs, a trainer	*Terence Bray*
"Sam Buckley, a jockey	*Sidney Parsons*
"Caroline, a maid	*Geraldine Santley*
"Evans, a butler——	

"Evans, a butler—by God!" said Spears, and repeated:

"Evans, a butler	*Philip Nelson*"

He broke off, and scratched his head. "What the deuce . . ." And then his expression slowly changed and became very set and grim. Now that he looked at it more closely, he saw that the photograph of the man on the page of the cutting book adjoining the programme of *Go As You Please* was signed "Yours, Evans." . . .

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TEST OF THE WATCHES

BROADCASTING HOUSE has only too often been compared with a ship, particularly with a ship forging down Portland Place towards Oxford Circus; though if the comparison is at all justifiable, it should really be with the stern half of a ship forging northwards towards Regent's Park, if expert naval opinion is to be believed.

Julian Caird had never thought much of the comparison—perhaps because so many other people had thought of it first. But on this night of Spears's final experiment, as he approached the building from Chandos Street he had to admit that there was something not altogether inappropriate in the conception. It is probably the best point of view from which to look at the building. The whole curving length of its western side is exposed, the eight stories above ground climb steadily upon one another, and their lighted windows in the dusk seem in some sort to form the lighted rungs of a ladder between earth and stars.

This night was clear and starlit. About the entrance and on the opposite pavement by the Langham Hotel were clustered little groups of people, the group by the entrance for the most part regular "fans" of Henry Hall, who was directing the B.B.C. Dance Orchestra between eleven and twelve o'clock that night; the other composed of the curious, silent onlookers who are always to be found in England about the scene of any crime. This group, considerably varying in size, had become a permanent nightly feature of Portland Place since Sidney Parsons's murder and had resulted in two uniformed constables being specially posted on duty to see that it did nothing beyond staring and exchanging gossip of the most fantastic character.

Eleven o'clock struck from the Round Church, and Caird slowly strolled across the road. Frankly, he would have given much to be out of it. He was tired, irritable, and nervously apprehensive of what was going to happen. He had lost confidence in Spears, and his general discomfort was not alleviated by the fact that Stewart Evans arrived exactly at the same moment, so that they walked practically cheek by jowl across the hall. Since the episode at Green Park they had not exchanged a word, and neither man was inclined to be the first to break the silence now. If Caird looked ill, Evans looked ghastly. His cheeks looked flabbier than ever and in colour resembled grey paper. Although it was a hot night, he was wearing a light overcoat with the collar turned up to his ears, and a black hat with the brim turned down. A half-smoked cigarette stump was stuck to his lower lip, and altogether he gave a dismal impression of shabbiness and ill health. To Caird's relief, he went along to the cloakroom to leave his things, and Caird was left to go up in the lift by himself to the seventh floor, where the party for the test was to assemble in 7C.

Gradually they trickled in—Bannister straight from Patricia Marsden's flat, with his hair stivered up, and evidently bursting with spirits; Evans, who without his coat, hat, and cigarette stump looked depressed and unhealthy, but no longer ghastly or sinister; Rodney Fleming, with a red carnation in the lapel of his double-breasted dinner jacket, his black hair very smoothly brushed, a little less languid than usual, and evidently considerably irritated at having been dragged from his supper party; and Leopold Dryden, worn and haggard, but holding himself very stiffly, and looking about him with an effective leonine arrogance, as if challenging comment upon the fact that the insignificant Mr. Corkran was at his elbow with a pair of handcuffs ill concealed in the pocket of his raincoat.

Caird went over to Dryden and held out his hand. But the actor drew back and put both his hands behind him.

"No, Julian," he said, "not yet. When my innocence has been fully established, I shall be delighted. Until then, I prefer to keep my own company."And he sat down on the farthest end of the couch that stretched along one side of the studio. Corkran followed him, taking the opportunity as he passed Guy Bannister to give the latter a cheerful wink and to murmur, "My regards to the young ladies, sir!"

Lastly, and exactly two minutes before the half-hour, came Spears, and with him a bent and bespectacled old man, carrying what looked like a miniature Gladstone bag and wearing a shiny suit of old-fashioned black clothes.

The detective looked round him. He would have liked to add either the assistant commissioner or General Farquharson, or both, to his audience, but he was not quite certain that what he was about to do came strictly within the range of methods officially approved by the authorities at Scotland Yard, and he had not dared to take the risk of inviting them.

"Well," said Caird abruptly, "we're all here, aren't we? Can't we get on?"

Spears looked surprised. "Yes, I think so," he said. "Without going in for introductions all round, I should like you gentlemen to meet Mr. Weisskopf. Mr. Weisskopf has been of considerable assistance to Scotland Yard on various occasions, as an expert on watches. He is a Swiss who has been a naturalized Englishman for many years." Mr. Weisskopf smiled and bowed ingratiatingly. "It is probably true," Spears went on, "that he knows more about watches than any other man in England, and probably in Europe. Now what I propose to do is this: As I think you all know, a steel-tape recording was made of the scene in *The Scarlet Highwayman* during which Sidney Parsons met his death. I propose that Mr. Weisskopf shall listen to the recording, because it has been pointed out to me—thanks largely to Mr. Bannister—that the sound of a watch ticking is to be heard immediately following upon Parsons' last words. I believe that watch to have been the murderer's watch, for Parsons wore no watch that night. I think, gentlemen, that you have each brought with you the watch that you wore on the evening of the crime, and I propose that after Mr. Weisskopf has heard the recording, he shall, through this microphone—which is the microphone used by Parsons on the occasion of the crime—hear the ticking of your various watches. It is possible—I won't go further than that—that Mr. Weisskopf may be able to distinguish and identify the ticking of the recorded watch. Would you mind, therefore, handing me your wrist watches?"

Stewart Evans jumped up.

"Inspector, I protest most strongly against this! It's an outrageous infringement of our personal liberty! I'm not at all sure that you have any right to do such a thing. Do you mean that you propose solemnly to convict one of us upon the evidence of a sound not only distorted upon a microphone, but further distorted in addition by recording on an admittedly rather imperfect steel tape? I imagine you know your own business, but a considerable knowledge of criminology tells me that a defending counsel would make evidence of that sort look not only grotesque but even dishonest or worse!"

"I think, Mr. Evans," said Spears coldly, "that is my business. May I have your watches, please?"

Evans looked round for support, but Dryden was handing over an elegant, almost effeminate little platinum watch to Corkran; Fleming was yawning; and Caird was holding out a small, black-faced silver wrist watch.

"Very well," said Evans sulkily, "but I should like you all to note my protest." And in his turn he passed over his watch, which was of a rather heavy, old-fashioned type and set on an unusually broad leather strap.

"Many thanks," said Spears, collecting them. "Hullo, Mr. Evans—your watch isn't going!"

"I forgot to wind it up last night," said Evans. "You can easily set it going, if you want to, can't you?"

Spears nodded and handed the watch to Mr. Weisskopf with a shrug. The latter wound it vigorously, listened, and smiled.

"It goes," he said. "It goes most healthily. It has been a good watch."

"It *is* a good watch!" said Evans angrily.

"Quite so, Mr. Evans. Now, Caird, where can we hear this steel-tape recording?"

"I thought it would be simplest in the dramatic control-panel room," said Caird. "If you're ready to go up, I'll let the sound-recording section know."

"Very well," said Spears. "Mr. Weisskopf, Mr. Bannister, and I will go up to the panel room. I shall be glad if the rest of you will remain here until I come back. Mr. Corkran will chaperon you in my absence. And Corkran——"

"Yes, sir?"

"When I've heard the recording through, I'll get Mr. Bannister to press the switch on the panel which puts on the green light which you can see there on the wall—do you understand? That will be in about five minutes' time."

"Yes, sir."

"As soon as you see that green light, will you please put these watches, in any order you like, in front of the microphone, at a distance of about six inches? Mr.

Caird will show you the exact position occupied by Mr. Parsons immediately before his death."

"I understand, sir."

"Leave ten seconds between each watch—no, better still, Mr. Bannister will put on the green light as a signal to you to put each watch separately in front of the microphone. Then, when Mr. Weisskopf is satisfied that he has heard as much as can be useful to him, I shall come down here again."

"Very good, sir."

"I am sure you will realize," Spears continued, turning to the others, "that it is for the good of you all that you should all remain here during the whole of this test. None of you therefore must in any circumstances leave the studio until I return."

"Do you think you'll get through by midnight, Inspector?" drawled Rodney Fleming. "I'm keeping a lady waiting, you know."

"I shan't be longer than I can help, Mr. Fleming. Come along, Weisskopf. Will you lead the way, Mr. Bannister?"

"Oh, Bannister," said Caird, "you'll pass the blattnerphone rooms at the end of the passage. Just put your head in and tell Agnew of the sound-recording section to go ahead in two minutes. That'll give you lots of time to get up to the panel room."

"Right you are, Julian." And Bannister, Spears, and Weisskopf went out.

They left silence behind them, silence so acute that the ticking of the four watches in Corkran's large hands was distinctly audible. To Caird the sound of that ticking was appalling. Trained as he was to differentiate and apply sounds dramatically, the ticking of those four tiny wrist watches seemed to swell and beat upon his ears as if they were hammering out the last moments in a condemned cell. Dryden sat back in his corner, his long legs crossed, his arms folded, his eyes on the ceiling, and his lips twisted into a saturnine sneer. Rodney Fleming took out his cigarette case, remembered that he must not smoke, and snapped it back irritably into his pocket; while the last of Evans's vitality seemed to have left him with his protest. He had slumped down on an upright chair made of canvas and metal, which looked too small for his bulk, and sat, one arm askew over its back, looking at the floor and quite still, except that now and then his throat moved convulsively. Only Detective Sergeant Corkran sat like a statue, having slid three of the wrist watches into various pockets on his person, and holding one—Leopold Dryden's—in his hand, the statutory six inches from the microphone, and watching the green glass of the signal light like a cat at a mouse hole. To Caird those five minutes were interminable. Apart from the artificially padded atmosphere of the studio, Dryden's histrionic pose, Fleming's irritability, Evans's nervous collapse, and his own apprehensiveness, there was something else—there was the presence of the real murderer. And as the clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, Caird looked round at his companions almost believing and fearing that he might see murder clearly mirrored in a pair of eyes, or blood dripping from a pair of hands. That Spears knew his man, Caird was now certain, and now for the first time he realized what it must mean to crouch on the firestep of a trench, following the second hand of a wrist watch ticking round to zero hour, when zero hour means the materialization of battle, murder, and sudden death. . . .

The green light flicked. With the slow movement of an automaton, Corkran raised the first wrist watch to the microphone, held it there while ten seconds was ticked away by the clock on the wall, and repeated the process with the other three watches, as the green light flicked—again—and again—and again. . . .

It was over. And Corkran, holding the watches in his hands, walked to the door of the studio and set his back against it. But no one showed any sign of trying to leave the studio.

"Oh, come on, let's *talk!*" said Rodney Fleming at last. "We're not all deaf mutes, even if one of us *is* a murderer. Old Whiskers is a deuced ingenious chap if he can get anything out of that, that's what I say. What do you think, Julian? You ought to be an expert on sound after all these years."

"God knows," muttered Caird uneasily. "I don't."

Stewart Evans suddenly threw back his head.

"I call such methods *American*—positively *American!*" he burst out. "I'll get a question asked in the House. I don't see why we should put up with such treatment——"

But there he broke off, for Spears, Weisskopf, and Bannister reappeared—Bannister very flushed, Weisskopf smiling and rubbing his hands, and Spears with his lean face like a rock.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said the detective.

"None of them made any sort of move, sir," said Corkran.

At that Spears frowned, and Evans burst out:

"Do you mean to say that was simply an attempt to work on our nervous systems? If so, it's even worse than I had imagined!"

"Mr. Evans," said Spears quietly, "I think the less you say just now, the better. I may as well tell you that the test was an astonishing success, for Mr. Weisskopf says that he has been able to identify the watch. Give him the watches, Corkran, please."

"Well?" said Caird in a strangled voice. "Whose is it?"

"I haven't quite finished yet," said Spears. "Having given Mr. Weisskopf a demonstration of the watches, I now propose to give you a demonstration. I propose to show you how the crime was committed."

"Isn't that rather an unnecessary waste of time," said Rodney Fleming, "if you know already? Can't you"—he paused artistically—"make an arrest, and let the rest of us go about our normal affairs?"

"It won't take long, Mr. Fleming, I promise you. I quite understand your anxiety to get away. Now what I propose to do is this: I am going to ask you, Mr. Caird, to behave exactly as you behaved on the night of the murder, so that the timing may be exact. I shall impersonate the murderer, and I think everything at last will be made perfectly clear."

CHAPTER XXXII

HOW IT WAS DONE

"AGAIN," Spears went on, after a little pause, "I shall have to ask all of you, except Mr. Caird, to remain precisely where you are. I shall ask Mr. Weisskopf here to impersonate Sidney Parsons, and here, incidentally, is Mr. Parsons' script. Mr. Bannister, will you come with me and Mr. Caird to the dramatic control room, so that you can give the light cue for Mr. Weisskopf to start Mr. Parsons' soliloquy? Caird, of course, will already have left the D.C. room on his way to 6A."

Bannister nodded.

"By the way, Caird, on your way to the D.C. room would you mind drawing back the curtain which covers the glass panel between this studio and the triangular listening room? I want my audience here to be able to follow the murderer's actions after he leaves the studio."

"Very well," said Caird.

"You will find me," Spears concluded, "where the murderer went immediately after he had committed the crime. As before, I leave you under Corkran's care."

He opened the door for Caird and Bannister, saw that the curtain across the glass panel was duly drawn, and disappeared along the corridor.

If the atmosphere in 7C had been tense before, it was now electric.

Dryden threw aside his assumed composure and began to prowl up and down, until Corkran put a hand on his elbow. Whereupon he jumped away as if he had been stung, and sat down again, his clasped hands gripping one knee. Fleming licked dry lips; while Evans, patently on the edge of complete collapse, fumbled at his collar and began to mutter to himself.

But this time the suspense was not to last long. Through the glass panel they saw Caird, his face white and drawn, hurry across the triangular listening room on his way to 6A. Almost simultaneously the green light flickered in 7C, and Weisskopf began to mutter Parsons' soliloquy. A few seconds more, and the door into 7C opened quite silently. Spears appeared in the doorway, moving on tiptoe. His hands were gloved. Closing the door noiselessly, he tiptoed up behind Weisskopf. The latter, approaching the end of his speech, half-turned his head and saw him. Breaking his sentence, "Good—Evans—you——" he gasped out.

Before the staring eyes of the little group assembled in the studio, Spears had whipped his left hand across Weisskopf's mouth, his right round his throat. For a moment or two Spears's left wrist, on which a wrist watch ticked, was held within six inches of the front of the microphone. Then Weisskopf went limp. Spears shifted his left hand down to join his right round the little man's throat, and, still pretending to choke him, silently lowered him to the floor of the studio. That done, Spears made the movement of tearing the outer page off the dead man's script and, again on tiptoe, walked to the door of the studio and left it as silently as he had entered.

There was a scream from Stewart Evans.

"My God!" he cried. "It's a frame-up! He twisted that blasted recording into my name! He——"

"Shut up!" snapped Detective Sergeant Corkran. "Keep quiet!"

Spears came into sight again in the triangular listening room. From his pocket he drew a second pair of gloves—those unmistakably scalloped, gauntlet-wristed gloves of Leopold Dryden's, tossed them into Higgins's cupboard, and slammed the door. Still coolly deliberate, he could be seen striking a match and setting light to the torn page of script now twisted to the shape of a spill, and jamming it, lighted end downwards, into the funnel ashtray. Then again he passed out of sight, and perhaps eight seconds later Caird recrossed the triangular listening room in the opposite direction on his way back to the panel room.

"Well, I think that's all," said Corkran, "except for finding the inspector."

"You'll let me out at once!" yelled Evans, making a rush for the door. "Tomfoolery's one thing, but when it comes to faking evidence—I tell you I was never on the landing! I was never higher than the fourth floor that night. Let me out, I say, damn you!"

Corkran disregarded him and still stood firmly with his back against the door.

"We shall leave the studio now in this order," he said, in what he fondly believed to be an official tone of voice, for it must be confessed that the detective sergeant was enjoying himself considerably, "Mr. Fleming, Mr. Evans, Mr. Dryden, and myself. And the places where Inspector Spears is to be looked for are the dramatic control-panel room No. 1, the listening room to Studio No. 6A, Studio No. 6A itself, and Mr. Stewart Evans' office on the fourth floor. I might add, gentlemen, in case any of you don't feel inclined to stay with the party,"—and he looked Stewart Evans very straight in the face—"that the inspector has a couple of plain-clothesmen on duty in the entrance hall, which I understand to be the only means of egress from the building at this time of night. Now, Mr. Fleming, will you lead the way?" He stood aside and opened the door.

Fleming stood up and passed a hand over his hair.

"Thank God, one can smoke in the passages, anyway," he said, took out his cigarette case, and passed through the door, Evans almost treading on his heels, Leopold Dryden and Corkran bringing up the rear.

Suddenly there came a cry of pain from Evans, for Fleming had trodden back violently onto his toes, and his cigarette case had clattered to the floor.

The door of the listening room to 6A was open; and there sat Spears, the telephone to his ear, exactly as Rodney Fleming had sat when Caird passed him, on the fatal evening, on his way back to the panel from Studio 6A!

CHAPTER XXXIII

GONE AWAY!

IT WAS just at this moment that Julian Caird, with Bannister at his elbow, on their way down from the D.C. room and their share in Spears's reconstruction of the crime, opened the door of the triangular listening room.

For an instant the tableau of clustered motionless figures was reminiscent of waxworks, or the curtain of the second act of a play. Then two things happened simultaneously. Spears laid down the receiver of the telephone; and Fleming stooped deliberately to the floor and picked up his cigarette case.

"I think I begin to agree with Mr. Evans, Inspector," he said, "that your methods——"

"That'll do!" snapped Spears. "I propose to put you under arrest for the murder of Sidney Parsons, and I warn you formally that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

"But, Rodney!" gasped Caird. "Spears, you can't mean——"

"I suppose this is another of your clever tricks," said Fleming. And now all the drawl had gone out of his voice. "I warn you, I don't stand for this sort of thing, Inspector. I've got a perfectly good alibi, and you know it—unless you've neglected your duty grossly and failed to investigate it from the other end."

"I don't think we'll argue it," said Spears. "That alibi was an extremely ingenious fake. It's perfectly true that you got that call, and it's perfectly true that the telephone was used for six minutes. *But only one person spoke on the telephone,* Mr. Fleming, and that person was your brother reading the rewritten scene of your first play. I've timed it, and it lasts exactly five minutes and a half. It was while he was reading that that you murdered Sidney Parsons."

"Very ingenious, Inspector. I only hope you'll be able to prove it in court. Would you mind telling me just *why* I murdered him?"

"You murdered him because he was not only blackmailing Mrs. Dryden, but because he was also blackmailing you. He was bleeding you separately, but it was for the same thing—for a liaison that existed between you and Mrs. Dryden when you were both on tour some years ago in a play called *Go As You Please.*"

But still Rodney Fleming faced the inspector steadily.

"Your imagination's a pretty one, Inspector. Perhaps you can also find an explanation of why Parsons, according to your own reconstruction of the crime, should have addressed the murderer as 'Evans'?"

"Mr. Fleming, when you were on that tour, you were acting under another name. You took the name of Philip Nelson, and the part you were playing was that of a butler called Evans. No doubt the other members of the cast on that tour came to address you by the name of your part. Actors tell me that sometimes happens. Besides, are you going to deny this?" And he took from his pocket the photograph from the page of Isabel Dryden's press-cuttings book adjacent to that on which had been pasted the programme of *Go As You Please,* at the Shakespeare Theatre, Brighton.

And Caird, peering forward, recognized with a sickening feeling in his stomach that the face in the photograph was a younger edition of his friend's, and that the signature "Yours, 'Evans,'" was undoubtedly in his handwriting. . . .

Spears took a step forward.

"I think I've kept my promise and cleared things up," he said. "Will you give me your word to come quietly, Mr. Fleming? Or must I use these?" And he touched the pair of handcuffs in his pocket significantly.

"A murderer's word? You're trustful, Inspector. Anything you like."

All this time he had been holding his cigarette case, and now he proceeded to pocket it. A second too late, the detective saw that his hand was approaching, not the side pocket of his jacket, but the hip pocket of his trousers; and in a flash Fleming had jumped sideways, so that he had the corridor clear towards the lifts at his back and the others looking into the muzzle of an automatic pistol.

"I don't want to have to hurt any of you," he said. "Unless perhaps it's you, Evans. You've been a friend of mine, Julian, and so have you, Leopold; and for a detective, Inspector, I call you damned ingenious. But I'm not going out of this building with gyves upon my wrists, and don't you think it! I expect you will agree with me that another murder in Broadcasting House would be out of place. But the first one of you who moves forward, by God, I'll shoot him—and I'll shoot him dead!" And he began to back down the passage, his lips very set, his eyes as hard as agates above the wicked little barrel of the pistol.

Caird simply stood and stared. For the moment, the bottom had fallen out of his world.

Evans and Dryden, frankly deeming discretion the better part of valour, backed hastily into 7C out of the line of fire. But neither Spears nor the detective sergeant were the men to flinch in the face of a merely physical risk, and Corkran, pushing violently past Stewart Evans, rushed straight down the passage, with Spears at his heels. The detective was followed by the incongruous figure of Mr. Weisskopf, displaying remarkable agility for his appearance, and straightening out, as he ran, into a short but vigorous young man, whose real name was marked as Winter on the appropriate list at Scotland Yard, with a note to the effect that "This man has a singular aptitude for all kinds of disguise and the simulation of expert mechanical knowledge."

Fleming, who, to do him justice, had no desire to shoot, and believing himself to have got sufficient start, whipped round and ran for it. Had he turned left at the end of the passage, he could in three strides have been at the staircase that served the whole of the studio tower, and would only have been faced with the necessity of coping with the plain-clothesmen in the hall. But as it happened, he made a simpler blunder in geography, turned right, and found himself immediately in the corridor between the studio tower and the offices, with his pursuers at his heels. This mistake shook his nerve. He had neither time nor opportunity to think out an alternative line of retreat; he could only run for it. And run he did, straight along the dimly lighted corridor and through the swing doors at the far end. It may have been that he thought he could outdistance, or at any rate puzzle, his pursuers, by getting up to the engineers' control room on the eighth floor and by crossing it—occupying as it does the whole of that floor—regain access to the staircase in the studio tower. Whatever his motive, Spears, to his amazement, saw him go up the stairs and not down when he passed the swing doors. "Don't be a damned fool!" he roared. "You can't get away—you'll be held at the entrance!"

But Fleming only laughed; and, turning on the landing halfway to the eighth floor, sent a pistol shot crashing through the glass panel of the door within a foot of the detective's head. Glass flew in all directions, and a fragment of it gashed Spears jaggedly on the cheek. The latter grunted and staggered. Corkran turned to see if his superior was hit. It remained for Detective Constable Winter, alias Weisskopf, to fling himself up the stairs, just as Fleming wrenched open the landing window, stepped out onto the balcony, and, with the aid of the iron railing and a flagstaff, hoisted himself towards the roof. Winter jumped to grab his legs, but received a fierce kick in the face, which smashed Weisskopf's glasses and sent him sprawling. For an instant Fleming's trousered legs hung suspended in the window, then evidently he achieved the hold he wanted, for they vanished upwards.

"Damnation!" said Spears, wiping the blood from his face with a handkerchief. "He's gone for the roof! Ah, Caird—you're there. Can he get away?"

"I don't know," said Caird. "Only the engineers have access to the roof."

"Do you *really* not know? Or do you want to give the fellow a chance?"

"Damn it all, Spears, the man's a friend of mine—or was. I can't believe he did it, even now."

"Well," said Spears impatiently, "you can take my word for it he did. And we've got to get him. What about you, Mr. Bannister, haven't you any bright ideas?"

"Oh, go on, Guy—join the hunt!' said Caird bitterly.

Bannister looked puzzled.

"I'll get hold of the engineer-in-charge in the control room," he said at last. "He may be able to tell us."

"Good!" said Spears. "Winter, you'd better stay here, in case he tries to break back through this window. If he does, he'll have to come feet first, so you needn't be afraid of his gun. But don't put your head out to look for him, or you may get hurt again."

"Right you are!" grinned Winter.

"And for God's sake, man," Spears continued, "take your wig off! Now, Mr. Bannister, where's your engineer-in-charge?"

The aforementioned curiosity-ridden little group outside the Langham Hotel was beginning to break up. Midnight had struck from the Round Church. Henry Hall's admirers had duly watched him depart after enriching them with his autograph, and the uniformed constables no longer troubled to conceal their yawns. Miss Emily Barker of Twickenham started the rot by saying in a loud voice that she didn't intend to miss the last tube home, not for no murderers! Master William Hicks observed that he thought it was all a fair washout; and various amiable nonentities began to express a certain degree of mild wonder as to why they had spent two or three hours on a lovely summer night in staring at a building so completely unresponsive.

Then two girls who were standing giggling to each other in low voices, with their arms round each other's waists, uttered shrill squeals; and Mr. Samuel Tubbs, a prosperous butcher who had been having an evening up West, and had joined the crowd for a minute or two on the way home—being, it must be admitted, a trifle exhilarated by a combination of whiskey and port—suddenly said loudly, "Did you hear that? That was a shot, that was!"

Master William Hicks observed rudely, "Shot nothing!" While the Twickenham spinster suggested mildly, "It might have been a door banging."

"Door!" said Mr. Tubbs truculently. "I wasn't four years in the front line for nothing. That was a pistol shot, young woman, you can take my word for it. And I know what I'm talking about."

And as the group bunched together again, whispering excitedly, there was another squeal from the giggling girls, and one of them pointed apparently at the zenith.

"There's a man on the roof!"

"Yes," said Mr. Tubbs professionally, "and he looks as if he was trying to take cover," as a tiny crouching silhouette vanished into the shadow of one of the great metal ventilators.

"And chaps after him, too!" whispered Master Hicks intensely, as other silhouettes came into sight, dim against the starlit sky.

To Spears that manhunt on the roof of Broadcasting House was one of the most thrilling incidents in his career. It was almost like hunting on the crest of some gigantic mountain, with a precipice on each side, and nothing overhead but the stars, and the slim trellised towers of the experimental short-wave transmitter thrust upwards like queer steel fingers into the face of infinity. . . .

It was, of course, only a question of time, for there was only one method of normal approach to the roof, and that Spears, Corkran, and Guy Bannister—who had refused to be shaken off—had taken. But of the hunters only Spears was armed, and Rodney Fleming had still presumably seven shots in his pistol. They slunk forward between the towers and in the shadow of the great metal airshafts as though crossing No Man's Land on a raid. Then suddenly a spurt of fire split the darkness. A bullet whanged against metal, and the ghost of a scream drifted up from the pavements of Portland Place far below.

Spears pulled out his own revolver. He was extremely loath to make use of it, according to the best traditions of the Metropolitan Police, but it looked as if Fleming were getting desperate. However, he took one final chance. He sprang out from his cover and stood with his thin tall figure clearly visible against the sky and his revolver pointing upwards, and shouted, "For the last time, Fleming, will you surrender? Drop your gun and put up your hands!"

The only reply was a burst of mocking laughter, and then Fleming in his turn broke cover. He had been crouching at the base of the southern of the two trellised towers, and now he ran to the very edge of the roof, swung round on his pursuers, and emptied his pistol as far as his finger could press the trigger. Corkran had his left knee smashed, and Bannister was able next day to point with extreme pride to two bullet holes in his coat. But Spears was untouched, and Fleming's last shot was answered by the deeper crash of the detective's revolver.

Fleming was hit in the wrist of his pistol hand. The shock spun him half round, and for a moment Spears saw his face in profile, at last twisted out of its languid nonchalance, distorted with horror and despair. The pistol clattered on the roof, and then—whether the pain of his wound made him lose his balance, or whether the act was deliberate, no one can tell—he fell sideways, as a man collared at Rugby football falls on the point of his left shoulder, and dropped a hundred and twelve feet sheer to the pavement below.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SPEARS EXPLAINS

It was a week later.

The thunder and the shouting had died down; and as a crisis had arisen in the Balkans, and an attractive typist had had her throat cut by her sweetheart at Birchington-on-Sea, Fleet Street had forgotten all about the Broadcasting House Case. Stewart Evans had departed on a month's special leave owing to a nervous breakdown, and Detective Sergeant Corkran was in hospital. Rodney Fleming, untouched by the fitful fever of newspaper headlines attending the inquest on his shattered body, had been cremated at Golders Green. Leopold and Isabel Dryden had gone to America. With the common sense which formed such an unusual part of his complex make-up, the actor had seized the opportunity to exploit, on the other side of the Atlantic, an extent of publicity which in England was likely to prove for some time only an embarrassment, and he had arranged for a Shakespearean tour, starring himself, through all the principal cities in the United States, which would keep him abroad for at least a year.

Julian Caird, however, remained in London. Like Evans, he had been offered special leave by the controller, but he had preferred to stay and go on with his work. The tragedy of Fleming had hit him hard;

harder probably than he would have been prepared to admit. Caird was not a man to make friends easily or to undervalue those friends he had. Various people had suggested to him that he should go away, preferably to the South of France, where he could sit in the sunshine amongst the orange trees and the cicadas, and look at the green-shuttered pink-and-yellow villas beside the deep blue sea, and smoke cheap French cigars and drink vermouth-cassis and forget *The Scarlet Highwayman* and all that that ill-omened play had involved. But Caird feared that if he went, he would see continually in his mind's eye Rodney Fleming's face, so changed, above the automatic pistol, from the pleasant languid face that he had known; or that pair of legs swinging so desperately at the moment when Fleming had made his frantic climb through the landing window to the roof of Broadcasting House. . . .

So he preferred to stay. And it was largely for his sake that Guy Bannister, enriched by a small and entirely unexpected legacy from an aunt whose existence he had never even suspected, gave a dinner in the single private room of a small Soho restaurant and invited Inspector Spears, Topsy Levine, and—oddly enough—Patricia Marsden. Guy Bannister's motives were mixed. Admittedly, he longed to satisfy his own curiosity; admittedly, he had been encouraged, blatantly by Miss Levine and more subtly by Miss Marsden; but he hoped that if only he could get Spears to talk and Julian to listen, the latter would see the case from beginning to end as it really had been, and, by getting it into proper perspective, no longer view it from the point of view of exaggerated horror and self-reproach.

He was sufficiently diplomatic to leave the subject alone till dinner was over, but with the arrival of some tolerable brandy he felt that the moment had come.

"Look here, Inspector," he began, "I don't know how closely you're bound by the Official Secrets Act, or its equivalent—and all that sort of thing—but——"

Spears laughed.

"I guessed as much," he said. "But I suppose it would have been too much to expect you to be happy until you got it. Especially you, Mr. Bannister, with all your ideas! But aren't you all sick and tired of it? I shouldn't imagine Caird ever wants to hear of it again."

But Caird rose to the bait.

"I think if I could hear all about it once and for all," he said, "then I might have a chance of forgetting it. Honestly, Spears, it would help me a good deal if you'd explain the various loose ends. I suppose you were right—I know you were right. But when it's a man one's shared digs with and laughed with and rehearsed a play with, somehow it's inconceivably difficult to shift one's whole point of view and think of him as a murderer. It sets one's values all wrong, somehow." He broke off, and drank some more brandy.

"Oh, do tell us, Inspector," said Topsy. "After all, I did help, didn't I?"

"You certainly did, Miss Levine. I'll go so far as to say that without you I very much doubt whether I should have brought it off."

"Well, then, go on," said Topsy.

"Very well," said Spears. "You can stop me if I become boring.

"The curious thing about the case was that it was both extremely simple and extremely complicated. It was extremely complicated only because it took place under very remarkable conditions—conditions which you wouldn't find repeated anywhere else, and for which, of course, there was absolutely no precedent. No one had been murdered in a broadcasting studio before, and I think it's hardly likely to happen again for some time. But the essence of the crime was its absolute simplicity. That was, from the criminal point of view, its merit. I believe Mr. Evans said something at one stage about simplicity being the keynote of all great crimes, and of course there's any amount of truth in it. I think the easiest thing to do would be first to give you the actual story, and then explain how I got on the track.

"Well, Sidney Parsons was an unsuccessful actor, and a successful amateur blackmailer. As he went downhill on the stage, so he took more and more to the use of his second string. In an unlucky moment for himself—perhaps because he had found it so easy to squeeze money out of Mrs. Dryden—he added Rodney Fleming as a subject for his activities, using the same secret which he had held over Mrs. Dryden's head, but keeping each of them in ignorance that he was blackmailing the other. But it was one thing to blackmail a frightened, rather commonplace little person like Isabel Dryden, who was terrified of her husband, nervous about her reputation, and with nothing positive about her except the obstinacy of a thoroughly weak nature."

"Poor Isabel!" muttered Julian Caird.

"But Rodney Fleming was quite another pair of shoes. Of course, I don't know much about that kind of thing, but I imagine he had it in him to become a great playwright, and for his first essay in crime I take off my hat to him for his murder of Parsons. And he had extremely bad luck in some ways. What he did was this: He wrote that play, *The Scarlet Highwayman,* with two things in his mind: the certainty that, as soon as its production was publicized, Parsons would blackmail him for a part in it—and that is actually what happened—and secondly, keeping firmly before him the mechanical technique of broadcast play production, which would give him an opportunity to kill Parsons during the play and in an entirely inexplicable fashion. I believe the whole of the play to have been constructed for that end. That's why, Caird, Fleming took the trouble he did to learn as much about the technique of your production methods and the geography of your studios as he could before he wrote the play. He himself gave me a clue there during his first interview with me at Scotland Yard, but I admit I was too dense to see it.

"Very well. Fleming writes the play. You accept it for production. Parsons demands a part in it. Fleming, apparently under pressure, persuades you to give him one. There was no question of his thrusting Parsons into the cast for an important part. He suggested him tentatively for a part so small—there was nothing to it but the soliloquy and the death scene—that there was no earthly reason why you shouldn't accept the suggestion. The rest of the play was constructed in such a way that Parsons was bound to be placed by himself in a single studio, while the rest of the cast were engaged in another one.

"Next, of course, it was necessary for him to be within reach of his victim. This would have been impossible if he had found himself billeted in the dramatic control-panel room. It was much too far away, and his absence from it would be bound to be noticed. But the 6A listening room, which was two steps across the passage from the door of 7C, and which gave a view down into Studio 6A, and in which he could hear the whole play on a loud speaker, offered him a simple and heaven-sent solution. And when he realized that, in addition to that, there was a telephone, by means of which, and with the aid of the Broadcasting House exchange, he could establish connection with an ordinary outside caller, he saw that the 6A listening room could be made the scene of an unrivalled alibi.

"What is his next move? He deliberately instils into his brother's mind, during the rehearsals of the touring company in London, doubts as to the ability of one of his actors to play one of the scenes in the play that is to be toured. George Fleming, as appeared quite obviously in my interview with him at Leeds, was devoted to his brother and completely under the spell of his personality. Fleming counted on this, coolly and accurately, and, as soon as he reasonably could, suggested that those three pages at the beginning of the last act should be rewritten by his brother for the benefit of the actor concerned. Fleming knew perfectly well that those three pages played roughly about five minutes, and that rewritten they would take about the same amount of time to read. He then told his brother, George, to listen to *The Scarlet Highwayman* and, at a certain point in the script, to put through a call to Broadcasting House. The reason he gave was that he wanted to hear as much of the play as he could, but that if it was left until later in the play, the call might not get through in time to catch him; and that anyway he was not altogether satisfied with the end of *The Scarlet Highwayman* and could perfectly well spare the last five minutes to hear the three pages of the touring play that had been rewritten by George."

Spears paused.

"Please go on," said Patricia Marsden softly.

"Imagine, then," Spears continued, "George Fleming at Leeds listening on Old Harry's portable set in the stage doorkeeper's cubbyhole till the beginning of the ballroom scene, when he tells the old man to put through a call to Broadcasting House. Fleming is sitting in the 6A listening room, perfectly at ease, looking down into 6A, waiting quietly for his plan to develop. Suddenly the call comes through and is noted by the girl at the B. B. C. exchange. Fleming turns down the loud speaker in the listening room, picks up the receiver, and establishes the connection. 'Very well,' he said—or something to that effect. 'Go right ahead, George. I won't interrupt you till you get to the end. Then we'll discuss, if it's necessary.' And George Fleming begins to read the scene. You see the point?" said Spears, looking round the table. "The girl was almost bound to listen in once or twice during such a long call—just for an instant—and each time she would have heard what she must have imagined was a conversation in process. She wasn't to know that it was only George Fleming who was speaking, and that Rodney Fleming, instead of listening, was in 7C."

"Gosh!" muttered Bannister.

"It was devilishly ingenious and extremely simple. It would only take him forty-five seconds to cross the passage and enter 7C; two minutes at the outside to dispose of Parsons; another forty-five seconds to get back, and then he could peacefully finish listening to his brother, have a brief discussion, and ring off, with a perfectly established alibi, properly witnessed by the corroborative evidence of the girl on the telephone exchange, that he never moved from the 6A listening room during the critical time. If he'd been lucky, the mystery might never have been solved."

"But surely he was damned lucky," said Caird, "not to have met anyone in the passage?"

Spears shook his head. "Surely not. He didn't leave that to luck. He knew that you'd posted Higgins to keep that passage clear. He didn't know that Higgins had gone off philandering. His first piece of bad luck was your conductor's failure to press the return light in 8A, which sent you down in a panic to see Ian Macdonald in 6A. That was nearly disaster. If you'd been ten seconds quicker, Caird, or if Fleming had been ten seconds slower in crossing the passage, you would probably have met as he was entering the studio."

Caird wiped his forehead. "I see," he said. "Go on."

"However, to that extent his luck holds. He is already in 7C when you go through the triangular listening room past the door which has just closed behind him and down the staircase to 6A. Then more unforeseen events take a hand. In the first place, Leopold Dryden, who undoubtedly was genuinely ill, who had had this quarrel with his wife at dinner, had taken the opportunity of a five minutes' break in his part to get leave from Macdonald to be out of the studio. I am convinced now that his excuse for being on the seventh floor, which appeared so thin at the time, was perfectly genuine. He went as high as he could for air, which isn't such a very extraordinary thing to do, after all, when you look at it without an angle of suspicion. So that instead of Fleming producing a crime that was unattributable to anybody, here were already two people—you, Caird, and Dryden—who he had thought were firmly fixed in the D. C. room and 6A respectively, loose and roaming about that suite of dramatic studios at the critical moment, and therefore throwing themselves open to suspicion. Then another thing. Probably Fleming, who must have been fairly well keyed up—time being so short, and the matter in hand so vital—failed to close the door of 7C quite noiselessly behind him. At any rate, he made some sort of noise, and Parsons half turned and saw him just before he got his hands on his throat. Now that exclamation 'Evans' could probably have passed for a normal watering down or mistake in the script by Parsons, if it hadn't been for the steel tape recording. You remember, at the time Hancock hardly noticed it. But heard again and again it gradually impressed itself upon one as being out of place and abnormal. It was bad luck for Fleming that the play was being recorded for the empire that night. That was a point of internal routine he probably hadn't appreciated, and it was probably the one bad slip which, in the long run, cost him his life. Parsons obviously was in the habit of using that nickname under which he had known Fleming at the time when the incident occurred for which he was blackmailing him, and choked it out automatically when he saw his murderer's face over his shoulder. Fleming killed him quickly and silently, except for the wrist watch, according to plan. I might say here that I got a slight pointer towards Fleming, Caird, when I heard from you how he had been playing the piano that night to Mrs. Dryden. You can't play a Chopin mazurka without strong and well-controlled fingers, and that mazurka was a much more important clue than those gloves of Leopold Dryden's, which nearly put us on a false scent altogether, and concerning which, oddly enough, there is a curious little story."

"What's that?" said Caird. "Something to do with Stewart Evans?"

"No," said Spears, smiling. "You remember Dryden said he'd lost them at a rehearsal? He had. But he'd only lost them because Parsons, like the rat he was, had stolen them. He must have had them in his pocket when he was killed. Fleming, going hastily through his pockets, found them. Now the last man in the country on whom he wanted suspicion to fall was Leopold Dryden, for his interests were bound up with Dryden's putting on his new play in the autumn. Accordingly he took the gloves away with him from the studio and hurled them into the first hiding place he saw, which happened to be Higgins's cupboard, which the studio attendant had, as usual, left carelessly unlocked. He wasn't to know that Evans, pursuing Mrs. Dryden with all the fanaticism of a hopeless affection, was going to move heaven and earth to get Leopold Dryden hanged and ferret out the gloves as one of the strands in the rope."

"But if he took the gloves," said Caird, "why did he leave Isabel Dryden's letters? And what about the torn script?"

"Just a minute," said Spears. "Everything in its place. It's difficult to give you positive answers about those two points, as no one was there to see. Parsons was killed, and Fleming made no statement before he died. But what I assume happened was this: You must remember Fleming is being pressed for time. He opens Parsons' pocketbook and sees the letters. A glance tells him that they are something to do with Parsons' blackmailing activities. He cannot resist the temptation of reading them, however hastily, and sees with relief that there is no mention of him, that they are only letters from Isabel to Parsons. Isabel is safe in 6A, and so, to the best of his belief, is Dryden. If he leaves that clue as a red herring, there can be no harm done. He leaves the letters therefore in the pocketbook. But then he notices the outside of Parsons' script. Now here I am being purely imaginative—I can't help it—but I believe that Parsons was occupying some of his time, while waiting for his cue, in writing a note on the lower half of the outside of his script, which he intended to pass over to Fleming at the end of the play. It must have run something like this: 'Dear Fleming, You'd better pay up, or I'll make things hot for you and *your darling Isabel*——' There was no paper in the studio, and he probably thought he could tear off half the outside sheet of the script and explain to Macdonald that it got ripped by accident. Why the note was never finished we don't know. Fleming sees this note, which connects him blatantly with Isabel and is a direct pointer to himself as the murderer, staring up at him from the face of the script beside Parsons's body. Time's getting on. He must be back in the listening room to speak to George before the call closes. He rips off the pencilled scrawl jaggedly and leaves the studio. Again he is lucky, in that you, Caird, on your way back from 6A, and Dryden, returning from his excursion outside the tower in search of fresh air, must have again missed seeing him in the passage literally by seconds. I repeat, it was not unreasonable for him to have counted on neither of you being there at all. He doesn't want to keep this damning scrawl about him anywhere. He has already stepped into the triangular listening room to push Dryden's gloves into Higgins' cupboard. As he turns back, he sees the funnel ashtray on the slab. Quick as thought, he whips out a box of matches, twists the piece of script into the shape of a spill, lights one end of it, and shoves it into the ashtray, imagining that as it is pushed in with the lighted end down, the flame will run up it and reduce it to ashes. Unfortunately for him, those ashtrays don't work like that, and almost immediately the spill was thrust into it, it was extinguished. However, Fleming doesn't know this, and back he goes to the 6A listening room, picks up the receiver, and according to plan is just in time to hear the end of his brother's reading, and to say, 'All right, George. I think that'll do well. Go ahead,' before the second three minutes asked for by George Fleming are up."

There was a long pause after he finished, and Bannister suggested another glass of brandy all round. He walked round the table filling the glasses, but Topsy Levine could not repress her curiosity, and burst out eagerly but ungrammatically, "But how did you find out it was him, Inspector? That's what I'm dying to know!"

Spears looked at her. "Shall I go on?" he said.

"Yes, please."

"Well," said the detective, "I'm afraid that the principal way that I ultimately got onto the truth was the dullest of all methods of criminal investigation. It was our old friend the process of elimination. As you know, in the first place, everything pointed to Leopold

Dryden. He had no alibi. His excuse was flimsy. There was the motive of revenge for the blackmailing of his wife. There was his own stupidly obstinate attitude; and then there was the curious episode of the gloves. But though in the circumstances we were practically bound to arrest him, the case against him was never in my view cast-iron. His personality was not the least that of a murderer, and the gloves, if anything, did a good deal towards convincing me of his innocence. They were such easy things to have been planted, or even used, by the real criminal, though, as we now know, they actually were hidden by the real criminal, who hadn't the least desire to have Dryden suspected. Personally, if I had been able to shake Ian Macdonald's flat and positive conviction that Isabel Dryden had never been out of his sight all the evening, I should have far more easily suspected her. She had a motive. She was liable to gusts of almost febrile fury, during which a woman can commit astonishing actions of violence—actions, too, that need considerable strength—and she certainly had one of the strongest of all possible motives that can incite to and explain murder. But her alibi was impregnable, and as Dryden retired into the background, I was left with yourself, Caird, Stewart Evans, and Fleming, apart from possible outsiders. Of course, I was very fortunate in this, that, owing to the conditions under which that play was being produced, the vast majority of the cast and people not concerned with the play in Broadcasting House could all be eliminated, owing to lack of physical opportunity. I almost immediately came to the sound conclusion that it was impossible for a complete outsider to have fluked along that passage at the right moment and to have caught Parsons at just the right time in the play for the murder to go undetected until its close. So it was down to you three. There was a big black mark against each one of you. I admit I began by thinking it must be Fleming, because in that listening room he was in such a far better position to accomplish the crime than anyone else, and he had undoubtedly planted himself in that listening room for reasons which didn't carry too much weight. But his telephone trick deceived me for the time being. It was confirmed by the girl at the exchange and by Trunks, even before I went to investigate personally the putting through of the call from Leeds. There was certainly no doubt that the call came through, that it had been taken by Fleming, that it had lasted for six minutes, and that he had been heard completing it. Of course, I was deceived. You know that now, and I know it. But I don't think it appears so very unreasonable that I shouldn't have spotted it at the time. So that for the time being, Fleming, too, was eliminated. And then it came to the question of you or Stewart Evans. I never seriously suspected you, though your manner, as the case went on, did about all it could to make me wonder whether I hadn't perhaps put you out of the running too easily. But I could find no vestige of motive, which was the chief point in your favour, nor did I see how you could have arranged for the return light from 8A to fail, to give you your excuse to leave the dramatic control-panel room, unless your orchestral conductor or some engineer had been your accomplice. And for this there was no vestige of evidence, though I made a certain number of tactful enquiries."

"What ho!" observed Guy Bannister frivolously. "I should like to have seen Billy Sanderson's face when you started those enquiries!" For Billy Sanderson was the orchestral conductor concerned, and a very positive and peppery character into the bargain.

"Finally, Mr. Stewart Evans. Evans, of course, was the 'mystery man' of the case—a real Edgar Wallace character. The trouble about him was that not only were all of you only too anxious to find that he was guilty, but that he apparently wanted to do everything on earth he could to confirm that impression himself. No doubt his reason for being in the building on the night of the broadcast was perfectly sound, but it looked like an astonishingly feeble excuse to a detective uninitiated into the mysteries of the internal workings of the B. B. C. He started amateur sleuthing, which is enough to make anyone an object of suspicion—with apologies to you, Mr. Bannister!"

Guy grinned, and Pat Marsden took the opportunity to squeeze his hand under the table.

"If he didn't 'plant' Dryden's gloves, he did the next best thing by finding them and bringing them to me. And then, of course, there was the infernal coincidence of his name. You see, I thought I'd done a masterly piece of detection, according to the best Roger Sheringham traditions, when I spotted that exclamation of Parsons as being 'Evans,' and not ''Eavens', and though I say it as shouldn't, it was a fairly intelligent thing to notice. But it very nearly led me to make my worst mistake and again arrest the wrong man! If only I could have found the slightest evidence to show that Stewart Evans had been seen on any floor higher than the fourth on the night of the crime, I certainly should have arrested him. You see, it so rapidly became obvious that he was passionately in love with Mrs. Dryden, though she did not reciprocate, that for motive it was possible to put down the elimination of Parsons as a piece of quixotic service to her. Then there were his further attempts to blacken Dryden, and his generally obstructive attitude towards myself in the later stages of the case. But it was no good. There was that hopeless gap which I had no means of bridging between his office on the fourth floor and the murder on the seventh. Lastly, I doubt if he had the physical strength to kill even a man like Parsons with his hands."

"But what about that lunacy of his at the tube station?" interrupted Caird.

"My dear Caird," said Spears, "I'm sorry to seem superior, but I'm positive that I told you the truth when I advised you to drop it and call it a mutually exaggerated accident. That was precisely what it was. At that moment, you and he—particularly he—were suspecting each other rabidly. His suspicions were increased that night by your attempt at fraternization at your club. What I believe happened in fact was this: Evans genuinely stumbled; you automatically caught hold of him to support him; he promptly imagined you were trying to put him under the train, and wrenched violently away, so that you fell to the platform, thinking that *he'd* tried to push *you* under the train."

"While, in fact," Bannister broke in, "neither of them had the slightest intention of pushing either of them under the jolly old train!"

"Precisely."

"I'm sorry to have dragged that particular red herring," said Caird.

"Oh, don't say that. As a matter of fact, it was rather helpful. These mutual accusations struck me as so fantastic—for if either you or Evans were the criminal, it meant he was entirely losing his head—that I began to think again, by the process of elimination, about Fleming. Mark you, I hadn't completely eliminated Evans. I never did, as a faint possibility, right up to that test demonstration. That was why I held it. And incidentally, I've been properly ticked off by the assistant commissioner for using the method at all!

"But it seemed to be worth while to investigate the whole question of Fleming once more, and as fully as it could be done. By the way, Mr. Bannister, I take it you don't want me to go into the rather painful subject of the studio attendant Higgins?"

Guy Bannister flushed, and Topsy said indignantly, "We know all about that, Inspector. We were there."

"Still," Spears went on, "I suppose, on the principle of strictly chronological elimination of all possible suspects, I ought to have mentioned him earlier. However, I'll go back to Fleming. As you know, I went myself to Leeds to investigate the other end of his alibi.

I saw George Fleming, and I was immediately convinced of one thing: that if he was an accomplice, he was a completely innocent one. But it was in talking to him that I got my first real pointer—it was when I discovered that the famous rewritten scene was only three pages long. Its significance didn't come to me at once, but it struck me as a little queer. It also struck me as odd that George Fleming should have broken off listening to his brother's play in order to put a call through, especially as it became obvious that it was Rodney Fleming who had arranged just when the call should be made. I was thinking about those two things in the train coming back, when quite independently I had my brain-wave about ' 'Eavens—Evans.' That, of course, told heavily—to the best of my knowledge—against Stewart Evans. But I also took the opportunity to time a reading of those three pages of script rewritten by George Fleming and to note that they took exactly five and a half minutes. So it obviously lay between Stewart Evans, against whom I had the overwhelming conviction of Parsons' own voice addressing him by name, and Fleming, who had arranged for a telephone call to be made to him at the critical period of the evening—a telephone call which could consist of an entirely one-sided reading by his brother in Leeds. It was one or the other—but which? I was blowed if I could see, and the more I thought about it, the less I could make up my mind, for there was no conclusive proof against either of them, and frankly I didn't see how to get it."

"And then," said Topsy, raising her glass, "little Topsy popped in and blew the gaff."

"That," said Spears gravely, in turn lifting his glass towards her, "is precisely what Miss Levine did."

"Miss Levine," said that young lady, "would be glad if she might be called Topsy for a change. She's not as refined as all that, thank you very much."

"All right—er—Topsy," said Spears. "But, quite seriously, it was Topsy who saved the situation. To some extent, of course, it was my own fault. I ought to have thought of delving into Isabel Dryden's past, and, on the face of it, it may look as if I'd been casual in not doing so. But the difficulties involved in tracing the existence of an actress at the time unknown, several years ago, had seemed to me to be so stupendous as hardly to be worth the trouble, though, as you know, I did take certain abortive steps in that direction. But Miss Levine's information about a touring company of which she, Parsons, and Isabel Dryden had all been members gave me a definite line. If only she'd known that Philip Nelson was Rodney Fleming, we'd have had the solution in a jiffy, but of course she didn't—there was no reason why she should. Fleming had taken care in his description to me of his past life, not to mention that he had acted under a false name, though he admitted that he'd been a touring actor."

"He had to do that," said Caird, "having been out with me."

"Ah, yes. As it was, for the moment it darkened the case against Stewart Evans, because Topsy—like everybody else in that company apparently—referred to Nelson-Fleming by his stage part name of Evans."

"Yes—silly, wasn't it?" said Topsy. "But there's another thing *I* don't see. If Isabel Palmer really had an affair with 'Evans'-Nelson—oh, I don't know now *what* to call him—how could she be friends with him now? The affair wasn't on still now, was it?"

"I think," said Spears, smiling, "that they belonged to that up-to-date lot who manage to go on being friends with their lovers after they've left them, or their husbands after they've been divorced. I don't understand it myself, but then I'm old-fashioned."

"I think," said Caird, "you're being unfair to Isabel. Fleming was Dryden's friend, not hers. Would you expect her to go to her husband and say, 'You mustn't use this promising young author's excellent play, because he was once my lover'? She very sensibly made the best of it, for everybody concerned, held her tongue, and was normally friendly, and Rodney himself was far too keen on his career to upset it for any reason."

"The biggest irony of all," Spears continued, "was the fact that if it hadn't been for this very friendliness, for his own telephone call which took her out of the room while I was cross-examining her in her flat, I shouldn't have had the opportunity to spot and study her press-cuttings book, and I might never have found the programme of *Go As You Please* and the photograph of Fleming, signed 'Evans' that was the one piece of sheer, howling luck that I had in the course of the case. And perhaps it says something for the gods being on the right side that Fleming should have made that telephone call at that moment. Well, of course, after that, I was pretty certain. But I was still worried about Stewart Evans. I wanted to clarify things finally, and that's why I did the test of the watches and the demonstration of the crime. The first, of course, was sheer undiluted fake, with the aid of young Winter disguised as Weisskopf. For, while I was sure that if Fleming was the murderer his nerve would stand it, if Stewart Evans was, his would not. But though Evans began to go to bits, he didn't collapse, and I went on to the second part of the demonstration in the hope, frankly, of giving Fleming a tremendous shock and scaring some sort of confession out of him, because I foresaw considerable difficulty—whatever our mental and moral convictions might be—of establishing his guilt against a first-class defense. You know what good barristers are. Fleming was a clever devil, and it wouldn't have been very difficult to pick holes in a prosecution's case that had to cover complications like the activities of a touring company six years old, and the evidence of steel-tape records and the relative geography of the studios at Broadcasting House."

Spears pushed back his chair.

"As you know," he said, getting up, "I was wrong. I suppose I ought to have known that a man of Fleming's calibre wouldn't give in without a run for his money, and the way he tried, even after he had dropped his cigarette case, to brazen the thing out was a superb exhibition of self-control. I've never seen anything to touch it. What happened then is ancient history. And in a way," he concluded, "I'm glad he took the long rather than the short drop."

"Yes, by God!" burst out Julian Caird. "Parsons was a blackguard anyway, but Rodney—I don't care what any of you say—Rodney was a damned good chap."

"He was an infernally intelligent chap," said Spears.

"I think I'm sorry for him," said Pat Marsden shyly.

And as Caird and Spears turned to the door, Guy Bannister put his arm round her shoulders.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, the following quotations from various sources may be of interest.

From *Modern Wireless:*

"Mr. Steward Evans, one of the best known members of the Research Section of the Dramatic Department of the B. B. C., has been offered, and has accepted, an important appointment with the National Broadcasting Company in America. This augurs well for the growing interest of the United States broadcasting organizations in Radio Drama, which has so far been somewhat neglected on the further side of the Atlantic."

From the *Times:*

"A marriage has been arranged, and will shortly take place, between Mr. Guy Bannister, son of the late Mrs. Gerald Bannister, of Bunstead Hall, Shropshire, and Miss Patricia Marsden, daughter of the Hon. Philip Marsden and Mrs. Marsden, of Cirencester."

From a letter to Detective Inspector Simon Spears, from Major Charles Cavendish, C. B., D. S. O.:

". . . the Commissioner tells me that he has already complimented you formally on your handling of the case, but I should like to take this opportunity of letting you know, quite informally, my admiration for the courage, persistence, and skill which you showed all through what must have been a devilish tough job. I hope this may do something to make up for the official 'carpeting' which I was bound to give you owing to your slightly unconventional methods towards the end of the case. . . ."

From a memorandum from the Controller (Internal Administration), Broadcasting House, to the House Superintendent (Copies to all Heads of Branches, Heads of Departments at Head Office):

". . . and therefore the following two regulations are laid down, and should be put into operation forthwith:

"(1) With the special exception of programme items arranged by the Talks Branch, no artiste employed by the Corporation in any programme item is in future to be left completely alone in a studio.

"(2) The iron balcony, by means of which it was possible for the criminal in the recent deplorable case to gain access to the roof of the building, must be removed, and all similar balconies should be examined to ensure that in no circumstances might they be put to a similar use.

"(3) The general supervision, during hours of night duty, over all corridors, offices and studios, must be improved, and I wish to receive a report from you at the earliest opportunity as to whether the carrying out of this order will imply any increase of staff."

THE END